

SERMON BASED SMALL GROUPS
IN THE BLACK
CHURCH

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Doctor of Ministry Final Project
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The purpose of this project was to describe the impact of sermon-based groups on the culture and climate of a church experiencing the loss of family, culture, and spiritual identity. The hypothesis was if sermon based small groups are used to address discipleship, they would impact alienation and produce spiritual growth and faith formation through in-depth sermon study. A focus group using four sermon-based small group sessions was developed and delivered. The qualitative research design utilized pre and post surveys to measure the validity of this study. The results showed an increase in spiritual maturity and faith formation among members.

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To my siblings, Gregory and Thomas Taylor as well as my extended family and friends who deposited so much in my personal and spiritual journey. To Pastor Wayne B. Lomax and The Fountain of New Life Church, Miami Gardens, Florida for their support throughout this process. A special thanks is extended to my peer associate and members of the Curtis/Steward focus group as well as my context, and professional associates for their assistance and time sacrificed. I am deeply grateful for the guidance and wisdom of my mentors, Dr. William H. Curtis and Dr. Gina M. Stewart.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my son, Keilan Jeriel Taylor and my grandparents Perry and Mattie Taylor and Handy and Hattie Mae George.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus in His Great Commission instructed the disciples to go and make disciples. The apostle Paul shared with the church at Ephesus that Jesus placed set gifts in the church “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). The pastor and church has a clarion call to make disciples. However, discipleship in the 21st century comes with many challenges. It is the predominant norm for both parents to work in two parent homes. Other families headed by single parents work long hours or multiple jobs to make ends meet. Also, children are more involved in social and extracurricular activities in school and community, which reduce the amount of time members have to be engaged in the discipleship process. The rise of social media and electronic communication has morphed how one looks at spiritual instruction and discipleship. More importantly, churches have become more of a commuter church than a community church in which people drive in from distances to their church. These are just a few challenges in which the pastor, staff, and church face in the 21st century.

This can be a very challenging task for a new pastor, lead or staff, who has accepted the call to a congregation, which has experienced some form of these challenges on their discipleship process. When a church has experienced these types of barriers, it creates additional challenges spiritually, emotionally, and socially, which are all key components for faith formation to occur.

The researcher discovered this to be true to some extent in his previous pastoral assignment but it became more evident and prevalent in his current role as assistant pastor at The Fountain of New Life Church in Miami Gardens, Florida. The Fountain of New Life Church is a merger of two independent churches, The Fountain of Pembroke Pines and Miami's New Life International Church, to become one congregation. The merger instantly changed several critical dynamics of the church. The church transitioned from a community church in suburban Pembroke Pines to a commuter church in urban Miami Gardens in which the distance, traffic, and schedules impeded members' ability to make it to Bible study or classes. Also, there was a lack of spiritual identity as people wondered about the theological implications of a non-denominational and Pentecostal denomination uniting together as one. Thirdly, the merger created a sense of loss of culture, family, and people feeling alienated during the transition.

The researcher held a meeting with the congregation to share the state of the ministry and to discuss ministry plans for the upcoming year. It was at this meeting that it became clear to the researcher that many people in the congregation were hurt, grieving, felt a sense of loss, alienation, and simply did not know the spiritual identity of the church. The researcher observed decreased stewardship and attendance, low morale, and apathetic attitudes and behaviors toward the progression of the ministry. It became evident that healing needed to occur if this congregation was going to rebuild and move forward.

For these reasons, the researcher believes this project will be a useful and effective tool for churches and pastors who are facing discipleship challenges. The primary purpose of this project has been to describe the impact of sermon-based groups

(disciples) has on the discipleship process in a church. Sermon based small groups would provide a system of accountability and fellowship, give the participants of the focus group a forum, which will allow them to openly express what they experienced, as well as how they were affected, and most importantly provide members a platform to engage the sermon in more depth and ask questions of clarity.

The non-directional hypothesis is that if sermon based small groups is the pedagogical tool to address discipleship, then it will impact alienation and the church will grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation.

Chapter one, Ministry Focus, presents the spiritual journey, which led the researcher to undertake this ministry project. This chapter also gives a detailed description of the context where the project will take place. After reading this chapter, the reader will gain a greater appreciation for the scope of the project.

Chapter two, The State of the Art in This Ministry Model, demonstrates knowledge of the area of ministry. This section presents a review of literature and model from scholars, which pertains to the ministry project. This chapter will help the reader understand the nature and dynamics of small groups. In addition, it contains literature detailing the evolution of sermon based small groups.

Chapter three, Theoretical Foundations, gives the reader an in-depth look at the historical, Biblical, and theological foundations of the project. The Old and New Testament biblical foundations are texts that support the project. Joshua 1 and Mark 4:1-20 provides biblical authority for sermon based small groups. The historical foundations extract from some the pillars of church history that utilized small groups to address

discipleship. The theological foundations are schools of thought that bend toward a doctrinal explanation for the project.

Chapter four, Methodology, describes the method and research design chosen to measure the impact of the participants in the focus group. This chapter also describes the rationale behind the selection of the research methods used. Also included is the non-directional hypothesis, the triangulation of data, measurement of the data and the instrumentation of the data.

Chapter five, Field Experience, describes the field experience, the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data gathered and conclusions drawn from the data. With this information, the reader will be able to see how this research model can be replicated and used by church leaders.

Chapter six, Reflection, Summary, and Conclusion provides a summary of what the project has attempted to do, evaluate the work completed, and possible suggestions for improvement. Included in this chapter are the researcher's recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

The focus of this project is to demonstrate the impact sermon-based small groups have on the discipleship process in the predominantly Black church. In his farewell speech according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gave the apostles a command, now commonly known as the Great Commission, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” This spiritual responsibility lies predominantly with the shepherd of the local congregation. The sermon in the Black church has been the staple and anchor of shaping one’s faith through the theology of liberation, eschatology, hope, love, and Christology.

Since the sermon has been and is the cornerstone of the spiritual and faith development of disciples, why do we limit its impact and engagement to the weekend experience? The sermon should be engaged, and offered an opportunity to be further engaged, clarified, and lived out in community (cf. Mk 4). The sermon-based small group provides this platform for the disciples to dig deeper into the sermonic thesis. Jesus’ disciples revealed that this platform is critically and centrally important in order to have clear comprehension of the sermon. The church of Berea adopted this discipleship motif. They would engage the same Scriptures from the sermon in their homes after worship (cf. Acts 17:1-12).

What are sermon-based small groups? Sermon-based small groups are an adult only fellowship made up of ten to sixteen people who meet on/off campus to share, study

and support one another.¹ Larry Osborne believes the sermon-based aspect of these groups strategically guarantees the Bible remains close at hand.² The early church, as depicted throughout the book of Acts of the Apostles, met in homes and the people were disciplined through the apostles' teaching and doctrine (cf. Acts 2:42-47). Andy Stanley defines small groups as eight to twelve adults in the same stage of life and area of town who meet regularly to pursue spiritual growth and healthy relationships.³ Brian Carter classifies small groups as three to twelve individuals who meet to study the Bible, share life with others, and serve God and others.⁴ Sermon-based small groups can be impactful for all age groups if developed correctly.

The Department of Education has spent decades on research correlating the quality and effectiveness of education to classroom size. The research concluded that the ideal classroom size is eighteen or less.⁵ The federal Class-Size Reduction program provides school districts an opportunity to improve teacher quality and student achievement. Many of our Black churches have not utilized the extensive research of the Department of Education or that of religious scholars who advocate that small groups are the most effective means of discipleship and a harmonious and healthy church community.

The discipleship approach to many Black churches is disjointed and divergent from the pillar and anchor of our faith—the sermon. The disciples are assumed to have a

¹Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2008), 77.

²Ibid., 43.

³North Point Community Church, accessed August 2012, www.northpoint.org/getinvolved.

⁴Concord Church, accessed August 2012, www.concอร์ดallas.org/growthgroups.

⁵Ready, Willing and Able, The Doe Fund, accessed August 2012, www.doe.org, 11.

fast-food spiritual digestive pedagogy. Over the course of an average week in most Black churches, the disciple is presented with a sermon, Sunday school curriculum, and a Bible study class or a small group, which in most cases do not synchronize with each other. The Sunday school curriculum in most Black churches is written by an external source that has no knowledge of the sermons being proclaimed. Many small groups curricula are constructed around contemporary literature, books of the Bible, topical issues, or station-in-life subjects. The extensiveness of the material presented to the disciple in an acute timeframe makes it almost improbable to have concrete comprehension and proper digestion. Osborne refers to this disjointed spiritual diet as data overload which slows down the digestion process.⁶

Moreover, much of the aforementioned material is not in collaboration or communication with the pastor who is the resident theologian and teacher. According to Jeremiah 3:15, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 5:2, the pastor has spiritual responsibility for the spiritual diet of the congregation. The sermon in most Black churches is the main spiritual entrée that the pastor invests most of his/her time preparing to feed the congregation. Since the pastor knows the deoxyribonucleic acid and development of the disciples and the sermon is historically the spiritual prescription for the congregation, then one should build the meal around the main entrée. Cleophus Larue asserts that sermons in the Black church incorporate “personal piety, social justice, corporate concerns, maintenance of institutional church, and soul care.”⁷ Larue also states that the

⁶Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 61.

⁷Cleophus LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press), 2009.

lived experience is a significant staple of the Black sermon. Thus, the sermon should serve as the driving force of the discipleship methodology.

Osborne states that sermon-based small groups intensify the importance of the sermon in the life of the congregation and the pastor. He contends that the preacher will approach sermon preparation and proclamation with more diligence and dedication knowing that the sermon will be the focus of spiritual and faith formation during the study experience. In addition, he argues that the sermon-based small groups catalyze increased attentiveness, note taking, spirited discussion, and multimedia sales of the sermon. The researcher agrees with Osborne that sermon-based small groups “put everyone on the same page and make them look at that page more than once.”⁸ Sermon-based small groups offer in-depth analysis of the scriptural content in a concerted symbiotic fashion while building healthy Christ-centered relationships. Also, the sermon-based model presents an opportunity to extrapolate the sermon into a format in which the congregants can engage in a structured platform for spiritual and scriptural questions.

Today, the sermon-based model is one of the most effective ways for congregants to grow spiritually in the face of ever-emerging activities vying for their time and attention. However, years ago as a young lad, things were quite different. Growing up, the Sunday school format and structure resonated with me more than the worship service and had more impact on my spiritual growth. This type of setting allowed me to be more comfortable and indulge in spiritual conversations centered on the word of God. There were healthy spiritual debates that my peers and me had in a teacher-controlled

⁸Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 61.

environment. Within these student led environments, everyone contributed making the class very lively and anticipatory for the following Sunday. Could it have been that the church structure had a gravitational pull in this direction since it only held worship services on first and third Sundays but had Sunday school every Sunday?

In addition to the significant impact that Sunday school had on my spiritual growth and development, the weekly family meals that were held at my maternal grandparents' house proved equally influential. Pridefully were the days of singing the Negro spirituals and our family talking to the youth about living for God. These gatherings created a synergy between family and faith. As the families grew closer personally, this translated into the families worshipping together, engaging in Bible trivia, and sharing celebratory and critical comments about the Sunday services and Sunday school topics at each other's respective churches. Out of my entire upbringing, why did the family meals become the epic center of his childhood?

Although my life was centered on church and very spiritual, there was a season of being out of church, which caused me to feel like a fish out of water. Attempts were made to reconnect with a local fellowship, however, finding accountable relationships was difficult leaving me spiritually vulnerable. Later, a small group of friends and peers decided to form a prayer cell in which we prayed nightly for God's purpose and vision for our lives. This prayer cell became the birthing place for my spiritual renewal and commitment to Jesus Christ. The prayer cell ultimately led me to connect with the First Elizabeth Missionary Baptist Church under the leadership of Dr. Verlon Benford Friar, II. Dr. Friar took me under his wings and began to mentor me to become more serious and

studious about the scriptures. This mentor relationship became invaluable in my developmental process as a disciple and a prognosticator of the gospel.

Mentoring relationships have always been critically and chronically important. God has directed me to scholarly, exegetical, prophetic preachers like Dr. Friar, Bishop Derek Triplett, and pastor Arthur Jackson, III that stressed the importance of sermon preparation and proclamation very serious. Passion and appreciation for the transformative element of these mentoring relationships helped shape my ministry. These relationships produced clarity around the call to pastoral ministry and a discipline for spiritual growth with accountability. These mentoring sessions along with other peers were priceless as they were compounded, collaborative opportunities of sharing and gleaning from shared experiences.

Throughout my spiritual pilgrimage as a disciple and pastor, I found myself wrestling with what appears to be a disconnect between the sermon and study opportunities in the church. From my introductory years of Sunday school to my current ministry context, the church's discipleship system seemed to have a disjointed diet that offered little integration, connection, and congruency with the sermons proclaimed on Sundays. Upon arrival at my current ministry context, there existed a modified Sunday school curriculum system that was more station in life (i.e. couples, women, former athletes, etc.) focused than the traditional model of Sunday school. The classes were a great attraction for many disciples but had no connection to the sermons or a systematic structure for discipleship. Shortly upon engaging in ministry, a rare but unique transition took place in the body of Christ that altered the ministry context. The suburban congregation merged with a small, struggling urban congregation and relocated to the

urban setting. Many of the suburban congregants were vehemently opposed to the relocation. Thus, the church became one church with two campuses.

The merger presented an opportunity to foster an environment for deeply rooted authentic Christian relationships. The two-campus environment created a sense of loss for some congregants on both campuses. The congregation felt they had experienced a modern day diaspora. Others at best were commuter congregants. It was decided that both campuses needed to rally around a common cause that spoke to the needs of both communities. The cause was a quality education. The economics and educational system in Florida was extremely impacted by the recession. Florida has an educational system that ranks in the lowest quadrant of the United States. Federal and state funding had been cut severely which meant that many of the tutorial and academic assistance programs had been eliminated from the school programs. The colleges and universities increased their tuition to record highs while simultaneously raising their admission requirements.

A golf tournament was organized to raise funds to provide tutoring, mentoring, and scholarships for the youth of the congregation. This tournament transcended the cultural, socio-economic, and demographic differences that existed between the two campuses. Congregants from both campuses served on the committee. This committee began to reach out to other members of the congregation to get involved in the planning of this community event. Many relationships were built and it allowed members of both campuses to talk about each campus' uniqueness and the history of both. These meetings proved to be about more than golf. They served to heal, transform, empower, and meet the various need of those in attendance.

It was observed that spiritual formation and transformation worked best through small structured groups. From this observation emerged the task of finding a systematic, spiritual approach to disciple this suburban campus. The campus had been reduced to a Sunday worship service with no other ministry opportunities. Avenues and alternatives were explored, which could build upon the sermon for edification, transformation, emancipation, and renewed relationships. Sermons were being preached that targeted the needs of this context such as healing, spreading the gospel, social justice, Christian love and commitment, and generosity but appeared to have minimal impact or illumination. Many times, clarification on a sermon or a particular sermon point was requested from the members. These and others reasons were plausible justifications for a twelve-week pilot study implemented to this suburban ministry campus.

The sermon-based curriculum was introduced to the adult discipleship class. The sermon based model presented an opportunity to extrapolate the sermon into a format in which the congregants could expand their insight into a biblical passage as well as engage in a structured platform for spiritual and scriptural questions. The curriculum was written by the pastoral team with questions that were saturated with the thematic thrust of the sermon and how it could be applicable in their lives. This pilot project allowed an integration of lived experience and biblical knowledge, which ministered to all of the diverse learning styles of the congregants. This milestone set ablaze something in me that was long over-due in the Black church.

There was a strong desire for the sermon to have more emphasis in the discipleship process of the church. Pastors spend many hours of research, prayer, meditation, writing, editing, and reading in sermon preparation for it to only be engaged

for twenty to forty minutes. There was a strong desire to explore how to extrapolate and place more emphasis on the sermon and address the Christo-centric and contemporary concerns in the discipleship process. This methodology would provide a systematic process in which the entire family; children to adult, would be disciplined through the same sermon curriculum. To investigate the impact of prophetic preaching in small group discussion and discipleship begs the questions, does sermon based small groups deepen or shape a hermeneutic of the congregation? Will sermon based small groups lead to more family discussions about the Bible? Can cyber-sermon based small groups be effective? Will a more structured and symbiotic spiritual diet (sermon based small groups) be more effective than a scattered, disjointed spiritual diet (Sunday school, Bible study)? Does sermon based small creates greater buy-in to church vision and mission? These questions were explored in this project to determine the benefits and impact of "Sermon Based Small Groups in the Black Church."

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY PROJECT

In order to develop an effective project model, it was necessary to gain an adequate understanding of the pedagogy, implementation and impact of sermon-based small groups. It was equally essential to acquire explorative insight of how it could be utilized in the Black church as a predominant form of discipleship. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the resources used to derive a crystallized comprehension of those areas. Although there are many forms and methods of discipleship, the resources in this section will be limited to small groups, with emphasis on sermon-based small groups.

The resources in this chapter are divided into three sections. The first is the pedagogy of small groups, which defines and describes the different types of small groups. The second section goes in depth about the implementation and impact of sermon-based small groups into the discipleship life of the congregation. The third section is about how sermon-based small groups can make the sermon more meaningful in the life of the local church. This chapter also shares the impact those resources have on this project.

Sermon-Based Small Groups in the Black Church

In the process of researching this subject, it was discovered that there is extensive research and writings on small groups but very limited literature on sermon-based small groups. It was also observed that there is no scholarship in this subject matter as it

pertains to the historical Black church. However, the scholarship that does exist is enriched with portable principles that transcend a cultural context. The works of D. Michael Henderson, a church history professor provided an introduction to the concept of small groups. His works have been integral in developing this research project.

In his book, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, Henderson refers to small groups as class meetings. He traced the class meetings to the days of John Wesley and adopted its nomenclature and definition. According to Henderson, the class meetings were the entry point for new disciples in the faith. The class meetings were also inclusive of disciples who were mature in their faith.”¹ Henderson contends that the class meeting matrix encapsulated several New Testament Christian virtues: personal growth within the context of an intimate fellowship, accountability for spiritual stewardship, bearing one another's burdens, and speaking the truth in love.² The matrix is viewed through Wesley's authorial intent for the ultimate purpose of making strong disciples through the following context:

1. Inspect a disciple's outward walk.
2. Inquire into a disciple's inward state.
3. Be informed of the disciple's trial and learn of his/her success or failure.
4. Instruct the ignorant in the principles of religion.
5. Repeat, explain, or enforce what has been said in public preaching.³

¹D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 98.

²Ibid., 118-119.

³Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, 111.

Paul Chilcote, a professor of Church History, is a Wesleyan scholar who has invested much academia to the Wesleyan methodology of discipleship. In his book, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, Chilcote describes small groups as “mini-communities of seekers and believers.”⁴ The author also referred to small groups as “little churches within the church.”⁵ He states, “Small groups met with each other to grow together in heart holiness and in the disciplined life of loving service.”⁶ Chilcote argues that the purpose of the small groups in Methodism was for disciples to grow spiritually.

Sondra Higgins Matthaei, a professor of Christian Religious Education, provides a more concrete definition of Wesley’s class meetings. According to Matthaei in *Making Disciples*, the class meetings were coeducational groups of about twelve people in each class. She further elaborates that the classes met weekly for one fundamental purpose: “Bear one another’s burdens, and naturally to care for each other.”⁷ Like Wesley, the author states the class meeting or small group design is to “meet together once a week to confess our faults one to another, and pray for another that they may be healed.”⁸ Matthaei concludes in which the writer agrees, “A relationship with the Christian community was necessary for faith formation.”⁹

Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas offer an alternative approach to how they define small groups in their book, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups*.

⁴Paul W. Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 113.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Sondra H. Matthaei, *Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 133.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 134.

They ascribe to groups of fifteen to twenty people as a preferred small group size as opposed to other scholars who recommend a group size of eight to twelve people. This group size “eases a lot of pressure and facilitates real growth.”¹⁰ Searcy and Thomas cite four reasons to support their presupposition that bigger is better.

1. Most people feel more comfortable in larger groups.
2. Most people are more likely to sign up for larger groups.
3. Most people stay plugged in longer in larger groups.
4. Most people form deeper connection and grow spiritually in larger groups.¹¹

Moreover, the authors believe that a group of this size will yield an average of twelve to fifteen people on a weekly basis. They conclude by defining small groups as “a safe, comfortable, stress-free place where individuals have the opportunity to meet new people, make new friends, learn something new and grow spiritually within a social context.”¹² This concept is more appealing than Matthaei’s model for small groups. It is believed that Searcy and Thomas’ approach will be more effective in post modernity.

Thom Rainer in his book *The Millennials*, also, contends that small groups will be more effective due to the largest generation in the United States, the Millennials. The Millennials are individuals born between 1980-2000 who is principal proponents of doing life in community. Rainer unveils that relationships (family, friends, or acquaintances)

¹⁰Nelson Searcy, & Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008), 15.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 25.

are major priorities for Millennials. He states that 20% of this generation is involved in a small group Bible study.¹³

Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson view small groups through the lens of community. In their book, *Building A Life-Changing Small Group Ministry: A Strategic Guide for Leading Group Life in Your Church (Groups that Grow)*, the authors state “When you begin a small group ministry, you first must achieve unanimity on community, with clarity—that is, agreement on why your church does groups.”¹⁴ They also advocate that, “theological footing on community has practical importance in terms of small group strategy.”¹⁵ Donahue and Robinson assert that strategy is pivotal for the congregation’s perception, perspective, and procession of the pedagogy of small groups. The authors’ state:

A small group ministry done right is never merely a program. While life-changing groups may have some programmatic elements, an increased focus on community tends to shift your church away from traditional programs. A groups-based strategy is a fundamental sea change from program-centric to people-centric ministry.¹⁶

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, in their book *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know*, provides a theological framework for small groups as a community for a place of spiritual growth. The authors quoted the apostle Paul in his second epistle to the Corinthian church as small groups being a place of transparency, vulnerability, and opening up to each other. “We have spoken freely to

¹³Jess and Thom Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 47.

¹⁴Bill Donahue, & Russ Robinson, *Building A Life-Changing Small Group Ministry: A Strategic Guide for Leading Group Life in Your Church (Groups that Grow)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2012), 312.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 345.

you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also (2 Cor 6:11-13).”¹⁷ Cloud and Townsend also offer their theological understanding of Ephesians 4:16 as a biblical passage that supports spiritual growth through community in the following manner:

From him’, meaning god, ‘the body’, meaning us, ‘grows’, meaning changes, as ‘each part does its work’, meaning people help each other. That was exactly what I had experienced in my own life and what I had seen while working with others. And this passage said it was ‘from him’ that ‘the body’ does these things.¹⁸

In essence, Cloud and Townsend assert God’s authorial intent is recorded in this passage in which God “planned for his people to grow through people helping people.”¹⁹

Andy Stanley, lead pastor of North Point Community Church, contends that small groups are one of the most effective contexts for creating community. In his book, *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building A Small Group Culture*, Stanley and Bill Willits state the following about the North Point small groups culture:

The small-group program is not an appendage; it is not a program we tacked onto an existing structure. The small group is part of our lifestyle. We think groups. We organize everything with groups in mind, and everything points to group life. In many ways, group life drives what we do—and do not do—as an organization.²⁰

Stanley and Willits further elaborate that a relational God created humanity with relational needs for significant connection. Small groups create the environment where authentic community takes place. Authentic communities are those that foster a system of accountability, belonging, and care. The authors define small groups, in which they refer

¹⁷Henry Cloud, and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 20.

¹⁸Ibid., 26.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Andy Stanley, & Bill Willits, *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building A Small Group Culture* (New York, NY: Multnomah Books, 2004), 13.

to as community groups, as “six couples or eight individuals who covenant to meet for eighteen to twenty-four months to experience authentic community and spiritual growth.”²¹ Small groups are the ideal places for “building relational, transforming communities where people are experiencing one with God and oneness with one another.”²² Stanley and Willits conclude that a small group community is vital for spiritual life. “As our lungs require air, so our souls require what only community provides. We were designed... to live in relationship. Without it we die. It’s that simple.”²³

Bill Search supports the high premium that is placed on small groups as a place of community. In his book, *Simple Small Groups*, he states that one of the principal purposes of small groups as community is “connecting, changing, and cultivating.”²⁴ Search emphatically insists that when a harmonious balance occurs between these three components, a group will achieve synergy. He further elaborates on the power that exists in simple small groups. The writer found Search’s insight to be vitally important when researching the dynamics of small groups. The author states, “The energy derived from a community that builds relationships, helps members become like Jesus, and lives missionally will be greater than the energy produced by focusing on only one of the three.”²⁵

²¹Ibid., 120.

²²Ibid., 45.

²³Ibid., 171.

²⁴Bill Search, *Simple Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 1992.

²⁵Ibid.

Rick Warren, lead pastor of Saddleback Community Church, states that small groups are the heart of Saddleback Church. He asserts, “small groups are the source of the church’s health and growth, center of discipleship, structure for ministry, launch pad for evangelism, enrichment of their worship, and the network of their fellowship.”²⁶ Warren argues that small groups are most effective because people are hungry for love, purpose, and life transformation.²⁷ Steve Gladen, pastor of small groups at Saddleback Church, in his book *Small Groups With Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* defines their small groups as a subset of six to sixteen people that meet in non-church locations such as homes, restaurants, coffee shops, businesses or any location that is convenient for the attendees to balance five biblical purposes: fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship.²⁸ Saddleback Church small groups are based upon a video-based curriculum.

In his book, *Sticky Church*, Larry Osborne, lead pastor of North Coast Community Church, refers to small groups as growth groups. Osborne defines small groups as six to fourteen people who meet weekly with the goal to velcro individuals to the Bible and other Christians.²⁹ Osborne has been coined as a pioneer of sermon-based small groups. The author has conducted extensive research within this area of study. Prior to reading Osborne’s work, the writer had limited knowledge of sermon-based small groups. Osborne asserts that the growth group community guarantees that disciples will

²⁶Steve Gladen, *Small Groups With Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 7.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 26.

²⁹Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2008), 42.

be close enough to other Christians to benefit from their knowledge and support.³⁰ The writer agrees with Osborne that Christian believers need a spiritual community that fosters collective experience, sharing, love, support, and accountability.

George Barna in his book, *Growing True Disciples*, agrees with Stanley and Willits about the role of small groups as nurturing community in the church. Barna classifies small groups as the cornerstone of the development process of churches.³¹ While both authors seem to agree, the question is poses within the African American context, “What is community?” How can these principles be implemented in the African American church context?

For the past three decades, most of the scholarship and discussion has centered on the implementation of small groups in a church context. Bill Donahue states that a church must first decide which of the three options they will implement. The three options are as follows:

1. Church with Small Groups
2. Church of Small Groups
3. Church is Small Groups³²

In the church of small groups, small groups are viewed as one of the options for building community and discovering whatever the groups might be studying.³³ In the church of

³⁰Ibid., 43.

³¹George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 121.

³²Bill Donahue & Russ Robinson, *Building A Life-Changing Small Group Ministry: A Strategic Guide for Leading Group Life in Your Church (Groups that Grow)*, 412.

³³Ibid.

small groups, small groups are the community that pervades every area of church life.³⁴

In the church is small groups, “groups are the fundamental expression of the church. To not be in a group (except for transition periods) is to not be part of the church.”³⁵

Most scholars agree that the next implementation step is to decide the organization of the small groups. Donahue and Robinson lobby for three options: mission, affinity, or geography.³⁶ Mission focused small groups are focused on serving the community first. Affinity based small groups are organized by people’s commonalities such as age, gender, stage of life, or hobbies to name a few. Geography based small groups focus on the demographics of where people live.³⁷ Donahue believes that the most essential component of the implementation process is to make sure the core leaders are involved in the genesis of the process.³⁸

Though Stanley and Willits agree with Donahue on two of the three options, affinity and geography, they also advocate for the process being simple, visible, valued, resourced, and modeled.³⁹ Osborne contends that having the right people is the most critical component if the goal is to build community and mature disciples.⁴⁰ In his pedagogical assessment, he asserts that affinity based small groups are the most effective. Osborne agrees with Stanley and Willits in this regard, that commonalities have a

³⁴Ibid., 423.

³⁵Ibid., 434.

³⁶Ibid., 453.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 463.

³⁹Stanley & Willits, *Creating Community: Five Keys*, 163-168.

⁴⁰Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 77.

stronger covalent bonding than residing close to someone in proximity. Osborne states, “Small groups that have the greatest life-on-life impact and stay together the longest are those in which the friendships are deepest. That’s why we tell people to choose a group primarily according to who else is in it rather than where or when it meets.”⁴¹

Searcy and Thomas vouch for the structure of small groups to be the third phase in the implementation process. The authors place strong emphasis on thinking creatively about a structure that will meet the needs of disciples in the 21st century. Family dynamics have changed and the church should invest time initially critically thinking about its small group structure. Searcy and Thomas provide two questions that should be considered before implementation. First, “What structure is going to best promote spiritual growth? Second, What structure will encourage the greatest number of people to sign up?”⁴² Searcy and Thomas recommend a semester system with an ideal length of ten to twelve weeks.

Cloud and Townsend offer the clearest and most concise impact that small groups have on disciples in the congregation. The authors believe that the ultimate impact and purpose of small groups is “the transcendent goal of the ministry of reconciliation.”⁴³ This goal, according to the authors, is accomplished through the following avenues:

- Reconnect to the Source of life and see that God is the source of whatever they are trying to accomplish in life and in the group.
- Reconnect through real relationships to God and through experiencing connections with others within the group.

⁴¹Ibid., 78.

⁴²Searcy, & Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach*, 28.

⁴³Cloud, and Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work*: 34.

- Experience total grace, acceptance, and forgiveness in the group- and the absence of shame guilt, judgment, and condemnation.
- Learn and experience the value of obedience to God as the authority of life.
- Learn God's ways and how to apply them to life situations.
- Give control to God for the rest of life (and relax in doing so) but take control and responsibility for themselves.⁴⁴

Osborne asserts that small groups should be implemented to have significant impact on the discipleship process of the church. Thus, he believes, that sermon-based small groups provide the most effective model to accomplish this spiritual discipline. First, sermon-based small groups “guarantee that the Bible remains close at hand.” Secondly, it provides a support system for the “need-to-know and need-to-grow moments biblically.”⁴⁵ Thirdly, sermon-based small groups make the sermon more meaningful to the life of the congregation.⁴⁶ In essence, Osborne stakes his claim that sermon-based is most impactful because it “provides a place to consistently connect people to both significant relationships and the Bible.”⁴⁷

Why sermon-based small groups and not specialty based small groups? Searcy and Thomas are advocates of specialty-based groups with varied approved curricula. Specialty-based groups are groups based upon an interest or passion. Stanley and Willits also agree with the concept of specialty small groups. Searcy and Thomas propose that one asks several questions to ensure there is a balanced community environment.

⁴⁴Ibid., 34-35.

⁴⁵Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 43.

⁴⁶Ibid., 59.

⁴⁷Ibid., 45.

- Do we have women's groups?
- Do we have men's groups?
- Do we have married couples' groups?
- Do we have moms' groups?
- Do we have athletic groups?
- Do we have professionals' groups?
- Do we have any age-graded groups (college, 20's 65+, etc.)?
- Do we have artists' groups?
- Do we have community service-related groups?
- Do we have enough diversity in time and location?
- Do we have enough of those different types of groups, but not many?
- Are the majority of our groups conveniently times and located for the majority of the people?⁴⁸

Cloud and Townsend classify their specialty-based groups as either truth/structure or process/experience.⁴⁹ The truth/structure aspect includes the elements of safety, valuable information, and a springboard into internalization. A study guide, manual, workbook, or topic provides members with a certain amount of predictability that makes them feel safe, if they need that.”⁵⁰ The process/experience aspect recognizes growth as a part of life grasped through relationships, not simply ideas.”⁵¹ The typology of groups Cloud and

⁴⁸Searcy, & Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups*, 112.

⁴⁹Cloud, and Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work*, 117.

⁵⁰Ibid., 119.

⁵¹Ibid.

Townsend recommend for group purpose and design are Bible/book study, topical support group, recovery group, or general support or growth group.⁵²

Due to the high variations that exist in the specialty-group structure and systems, the writer agrees with Osborne that sermon-based small groups offer more upside to study one thing and study it well rather than studying various topics and curriculum.⁵³ The writer found Osborne's scholarship to be most helpful and transformative as it pertains utilizing sermon-based small groups as the sole pedagogy for faith formation in the congregation. One of the fundamental advantages that the sermon-based small group provides is the resistance of what Osborne refers to as "data overload."⁵⁴ Osborne states that presenting disciples with varying topics or curricula other than the sermon is a disjointed spiritual diet, which slows down the digestion process.⁵⁵ Since, no scholarship exists for sermon-based small groups in the Black church, this project will explore its implementation and impact into its discipleship process while accentuating the historical pillar of its faith formation; the sermon. Osborne's work will be the guide for its definition, purpose, implementation, impact, and evaluation.

⁵²Ibid., 123.

⁵³Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 60.

⁵⁴Ibid., 61.

⁵⁵Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Biblical Foundations

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, "Pass through the camp, and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess (Jo 1:1-11).

The book of Joshua is rendered as a historical Hebrew writing in the Old Testament. Boice calls the book of Joshua a transitional book. He states that it transitions from a patriarchal age to an age of settled occupation of the land of Canaan.¹ Francis Schaeffer called it a bridge book.² The synergistic integration of the pedagogy by Schaeffer and Boice makes the book of Joshua a transitional bridge book. Schaeffer also describes this book as one of continuity of the Pentateuch as it opens with the transition

¹James M. Boice, *Joshua: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), 12.

²Francis Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 9.

and continuity of the nation. McFadyen identifies the book of Joshua as the natural complement to the Pentateuch.³

Schaeffer sees the book as one that illuminated the real history of Israel during a critical period of transition for a people who now settle down to also become a nation.⁴ The nation transitions from wandering in the wilderness to a land that God promised to Abraham 400 years earlier according to the writer of Genesis. “The LORD appeared to Abram and said, to your offspring I will give this land” (Gn 12:7). Joshua is the chief character of the book that leads the nation of Israel to this conquest of the Canaan land. The book of Joshua records this conquest as well as the division of the land, according to the Abrahamic covenant. McFadyen asserts that the book of Joshua can be viewed through three divisions: conquest of Canaan (1-12), settlement of the land (13-22), and the last words and death of Joshua (23-24). Thus, the major purpose of the Book of Joshua is to describe God’s giving the Promised Land of Canaan to His people Israel.⁵

Many scholars ascribe its authorship to Joshua, son of Nun. The dating of the book of Joshua has not been concretely defined. Internal evidence within the book offers close approximation of a time frame. B. S. Childs has noted that the use of the formula in Joshua 15:63 and 16:10 points to a period not later than the tenth century BC.⁶ Furthermore, Howard affinity is toward the same presupposition that the book of Joshua was not written all at once by one author. He believes that portions of the book were

³John E. McFadyen, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar Publishing, 2006), 52.

⁴Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, 2.

⁵D. M. Howard, Jr. “Joshua,” *The New American Commentary*, vol. 5 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 30.

⁶Brevard Childs, “A Study of the Formula, “Until This Day” 292,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 82, No. 3, 1963: 279-292.

written in Joshua's day and that it was substantially complete by the time of David at the latest.⁷ The major themes of the book of Joshua are the book of the Law, continuity of biblical authority, omnipotence of God, supernatural leader (captain of the host of the Lord), continuity of Abrahamic covenant, land, God's promises, obedience, holiness, godly leadership, rest, and faith in action.

The word now which begins the book of Joshua is translated in the Hebrew and. It links the book with Deuteronomy and the other books of the Pentateuch. The internal evidence in Joshua presupposes that the reader knows about Moses, his death, and Joshua as the minister of Moses. Joshua 1:8 confirm that the Pentateuch was completely written since the Book of the Law refers to the five books written by Moses. Literary critics worked within a unit named the Hexateuch to show the connection and continuity of Joshua with the Pentateuch and its JEPD literary interpretation.⁸ The book of Joshua opens with a paramount historical paradigm shift in the nation of Israel. It bridges the death of Moses as leader to the transition of Joshua as the new leader. Boling classifies the first nine verses of Joshua 1 as having a sermon sound. It has a regular formula for a divine installation of a person into a public office: encouragement given to new officer, statement of task or function, and assurance of divine help or presence.

The book of Joshua commences with a lamenting solemn over the death of Moses. "NOW after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying" (Jo 1:1). The removal of Moses from their head was a heavy loss unto Israel. For many years he had been their

⁷Howard, "Joshua," *The New American Commentary*, 30.

⁸Robert Boling, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 1982), 55.

leader and legislator.⁹ The author of Deuteronomy shares that people lamented for thirty days in the plains of Moab over the loss of Moses. “And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days: so the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended” (Dt 34:8). Moses was the one who acted as their representative before the Lord and as His mouthpiece unto them.¹⁰ Moses, for many decades, had been the mouthpiece of God for the nation of Israel. God spoke to Moses and Moses in turn shared the message of God with the people of God.

Now a major leadership transition takes place in the nation of Israel. Moses dies and Joshua becomes their next leader. God affirmed Joshua as the next leader and it was his sovereign succession plan. Joshua is the grandson of Elishama chief of Ephraim (1 Chr 7:27; Nm 1:10) and the son of Nun. Joshua, called by his family Oshea, means salvation.¹¹ Moses added the divine name, and called him y^ehōšua‘, normally rendered in English Joshua which means, “The Lord is Salvation.” The Greek Iēsous reflects the Aramic contraction yešu‘ (cf. Ne 3:19, *etc.*).¹²

The nation of Israel is located near the Jordan River. God has established His mode of communication with Joshua as His point leader. The communication is strictly between Joshua and Jehovah. This setting marks a new transition in Israel’s history. Israel is now on the fringe of entering the land of Canaan. This land of Canaan was the land that God had promised the patriarch of faith, Abraham.⁵ “And Abram took Sarai his

⁹A. W. Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1964), 24.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹F. Brown, S. R. Driver & C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 448, electronic ed.

¹²D. R. W. Wood & I. H. Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 612.

wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came" (Gn 12:5). Howard asserts that when God tells Joshua that He is giving them the land, God uses the Hebrew perfect tense of the verb *give*. The Hebrew perfect forms most often convey the idea that the land had already been given, that the complete act of giving is in view. Israel was not about to be given the land, but it already had been given it.¹³ This makes the important theological point that God was in control of the granting of the land and that the title to the land was already Israel's, even if they had not yet taken all of it.¹⁴

The Lord, Yahweh, speaks to Joshua and says to him that He is going to give him territory. Howard says that the word give is one of the most common in the Old Testament which can also be translated as grant, deliver, put, let, hand over, assign, designate, allot, or make.¹⁵ Soanes and Stevenson expound on this expression of the verb give as to communicate or impart a message.¹⁶ This survey of the Hebrew *ntn* (to give) in Joshua reveals several things. First, the land of Canaan was God's gift to his people Israel. He alone was the giver. When Moses, Joshua, or the nation as a whole were the agents of the giving, it was nevertheless at God's behest, and it was the land that God had promised to his people that they were giving. Second, God gave the inhabitants of this land into Israel's hands as well. They were not taking this land on their own, nor through

¹³Howard, "Joshua," *The New American Commentary*, 79.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶C. Soanes & A. Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

any strength or merits of their own.¹⁷ It is critically important to see that God saw Moses and Joshua as agents to give what He had already given. When it comes to the proclamation of the word of God, the pastor is responsible to give what has been given to him/her under the Holy Spirit.

The prophet Jeremiah stated that God is responsible for assigning pastors with the responsibility of providing the spiritual diet for the community of believers. “And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer 3:15). The apostle Peter further emphasized the pastoral responsibility of being the primary prognosticators of the gospel for the local congregation. “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind” (1Pt 5:2). The apostle Paul wrote to his son in ministry, Titus in Crete, that he had a responsibility as a preacher to have a firm grasp or handle on the word of God. “He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it” (Ti 1:9).

Joshua 1 also shows that the people must take a responsible role in the giving process. They become designated distributors under the authority of God’s appointed agents. In this context, it is Joshua. Joshua is the God appointed leader who now under the authority of God authorizes officers of the camp to participate in this sharing of God’s word. The Hebraic construction “לשמר לעשה”, where both lexemes occur as infinitive constructs to observe to do or to be careful to obey, occurs another eight times (including twice in Jo: 1:7; 23:6).

¹⁷Howard, “Joshua,” *The New American Commentary*, 81.

Howard's biblical interpretation was that God's message or instructions to Joshua were not about military matters but strict obedience to God. The keys to Joshua's success were the same as those for a king: being rooted in God's word rather than depending upon military might (Dt 17:14–20, esp. vv. 16, 18–19).¹⁸ According to Soanes and Stevenson, to be careful to obey or to observe to do are infinitive constructs that carry the connotation of submitting to the authority of or carrying out a command or instruction. Moreover, Soanes and Stevenson also assert that in Joshua's context it meant to behave in accordance to the law.¹⁹

Howard goes on to elaborate on the object of Joshua's obedience. God tells Joshua to obey the law. The law in this context is the Hebrew word **תּוֹרָה** torah, which is translated as direction or instruction.²⁰ Joshua was to be careful to obey everything written in the law book. This represents something permanent, since it was written down.²¹ "This Book of the Law" comprised the entire Pentateuch, the first five books (or chapters) of the Old Testament.²² To this end Joshua must meditate therein, not for contemplation sake only, or to fill his head with notions, or that he might find something to puzzle the priests with, but that he might, both as a man and as a magistrate, observe to do according to what was written therein. In addition, several things were written which had particular reference to the business he had now before him, as the laws concerning

¹⁸Ibid., 85.

¹⁹Soanes & Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁰R. L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries*, updated edition (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

²¹Howard, *The New American Commentary*, (86).

²²Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua*, 38.

their wars, the destroying of the Canaanites and the dividing of Canaan, etc.; these he must religiously observe.²³ Pink argues that God wanted Joshua to adhere to His audible voice in addition to the Torah. Joshua was not to be regulated by his own inclinations nor lean unto his own understanding, he was not to be governed by the principle of expediency nor be seeking to please those under him; instead, he must be actuated in all things by a “thus saith the Lord.”²⁴

“But thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein.” Meditation upon the Word of God is one of the most important of all the means of grace and growth in spirituality. There can be no true progress in vital and practical godliness without it. Meditation on divine things is not optional but obligatory, for it is something, which God has commanded us to attend unto.²⁵ “If ever any man’s business might have excused him from meditation, and other acts of devotion, one would think Joshua’s might at this time. It was a great trust that was lodged in his hands: the conduct of it was sufficient to fill him if he had ten souls, and yet he must find time and thoughts for meditation. Whatever affairs of this world we have on hand, we must not neglect the one thing needful.”²⁶

“Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people,” giving to them their orders. Observe that he did not call a conference of the heads of the tribes to ascertain how many

²³M. Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary On The Whole Bible: Complete And Unabridged In One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), Jos 1:1–9.

²⁴Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua*, 36.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 40.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 41.

of them he could count upon for cooperation, nor to seek their counsel and advice.²⁷ In so doing he did not act officiously, but was rightly exerting the authority with which God had endowed him. As the servant of Jehovah he was himself subject to the will of his Master, but as the leader of God's people it was both appropriate and necessary that he should exercise his power and control over them. Therein he has left an example, which each genuine minister of the Gospel would do well to emulate.

While it be true that they today do not occupy a position which is in all respects analogous to that of Joshua's, yet as those who have been called and commissioned by Christ to preach in His name (Jn 13:20) and rule over His assemblies (Heb 13:17), it behooves them to conduct themselves with becoming dignity and decorum so as to command the respect of those they address.²⁸ "Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, saying, Pass through the host and command the people, saying, Prepare you victuals, for within three days ye shall pass over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land which the Lord your God giveth you to possess" (Jo 1:10, 11). It is striking to note the iteration of this word commanded. First, the Lord declared unto Joshua "Have not I commanded thee!" (v. 9), then he commanded his officers, and they in turn commanded the people: the exercise of divinely given authority and the requirement of implicit obedience were essential if success was to be theirs. And those two things are indispensable today if we would have the Lord show Himself strong on our behalf. If the minister of the Gospel be required to exhort and rebuke with all authority (Ti 2:15), those committed to his care are bidden "obey them that have the rule over you" (Heb 13:17). God requires from His people a subjection to the ministerial office, as truly as he does to

²⁷Ibid., 46.

²⁸Ibid., 47.

the magisterial in the civil realm (Rom 13) and to the husband and parent in the domestic (Eph 5:22; 6:1). Discipline must be maintained in the House of God.²⁹

According to Wood and Marshall, the officers in the context assisted and recorded on behalf of their superiors. Moreover, they argue that these officers had the ability to write (Heb šōḫēri cf. Akkad. šaḫāru ‘to write’) which could be traced back to their Egyptian bondage in which the Egyptians used officers to record the work of Hebrew slaves there (Ex 5:6, 14), a practice attested to in Egyptian records.³⁰ Howard agrees with Wood and Marshall that these officers are more administrative officials than military officers. They were respected leaders in Israel, who had the Spirit of the Lord on them (Num 11:16–17; Dt 1:15–16), and who had some judicial and/or religious (Levitical) duties (Dt 1:15–16; 16:18; 2 Chr 19:11; 34:13).³¹ Matthew Henry states the officer’s primary purpose was to transmit the orders, instructions, and information to the people.³² A major administrative function that these officers served was to carry out the commands of Joshua who had received his commands from God. God commanded Joshua (1:7, 9), who in turn commanded the officials (1:10). The officials were to pass on Joshua’s commands to the people (1:11), and the people pledged to respond in obedience to Joshua’s commands (1:16, 18).³³ These officers bore a responsibility to assist in the communication of the word of God to the people of God. Sermon-based small groups

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Wood & Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 842.

³¹Howard, *The New American Commentary*, 90.

³²Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, Jos 1:10–15.

³³Howard, *The New American Commentary*, 91.

would require the assistance of key leaders to assist in facilitating discussion around the sermon proclaimed from the point leader—the pastor.

And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine, Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred. And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables? The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred” (Mk 4:1-20).

The gospel of Mark has widely been attributed to John Mark who many believed to be a disciple or co-laborer of the apostle Simon Peter (Acts 12:12,25; 15:37, 39).

According to scripture, there were several significant events that occurred in the home of Mary Mark (John Mark's mother): Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and place of prayer meeting where Peter goes upon his angelic release from prison (Acts 12:12). Thus many believed that John Mark used Peter as his source of information. While the information suggests that this could be a likely source, this book does not identify the authorship. Therefore, the validity of these hypotheses was confirmed by other sources.

First, Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis, writing about 140 AD. *From the Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord* stated that John Mark was Peter's interpreter and wrote down

accurately the things he remembered. Secondly, Justin Martyr referred to the Gospel of Mark as the memoirs of Peter, and suggested that Mark committed his gospel writing while in Italy for the benefit of the Roman Christians. DeSilva also alludes that the Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark to the Roman Christians.³⁴ Thirdly, Irenaeus referred to John Mark as the disciple and interpreter of Peter. Therefore, the early church unanimously agreed that John Mark was the author of this gospel and that it is predominantly composed of Peter's sermons with a Markan flavor. Gaebelin agrees with the early tradition that Mark was associated with the apostle Peter. He further asserts that H. J. Holtzmann, in the 19th century, compiled and centralized the biblical studies scholar's work which concluded that Mark was the first gospel to be written and that both Matthew and Luke used Mark in some form as a major source for writing their gospels.³⁵

The internal evidence within the gospel of Mark suggests that the destination of this gospel was to the Roman Christian community. Mark explains Jewish customs (7:2-4; 15:42), translates Aramaic words (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 15:22, 34) and seems to focus on the cross, persecution, plotting death, and martyrdom (8:34-38; 13:9-13), which at that time was legitimate concerns to the Roman believers. John Mark's mentor, Peter, also shared this concern (See 1 Pt). As noted above Irenaeus, along with Clement of Alexandria, associated John Mark's writing somewhere in the country of Italy, most probably Rome, while accompanying Peter (2 Tm 4:11; 1 Pt 5:13). Regarding provenance, it appears that Mark is located somewhere on the route from Ephesus to Rome.

³⁴David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

³⁵Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 8. Matthew, Mark, Luke*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 604.

There has been much debate on whether or not this gospel was written prior to or after Peter's death. Other controversy has been on whether or not Matthew and Luke used Mark as their source. Many believed that Mark was written in the 50's and early 60's shortly before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. Gaebelein asserts the Gospel of Mark was most likely written around 64 AD following the great fire against the Christians in Rome in which Mark wrote this gospel to meet this crisis in the Roman church.³⁶

The author of Mark calls his work a Gospel (1:1) because it contains the preached gospel. "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). It has an historical element since it discloses what happened in Palestine during the first century of our era. The Gospel of Mark captures five major divisions of the ministry of Jesus Christ: commencement of Jesus Christ, Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Jesus' ministry in Gentile areas, road to Jerusalem, and Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. The predominant themes in the gospel of Mark: authority of Jesus as Son of God (1:1,11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:1-11; 13:32; 15:39), discipleship, concealing of Jesus' identity, emphasis of Jesus as Jehovah's servant as denoted through the Messianic title Son of Man, teachings of Jesus, and the cross.

Flanagan argues that John Mark is setting out for the readers to know Jesus as the Son of God, but fully human, and vivid in his humanity.³⁷ He further asserts that the gospel of Mark was to be read or to be heard as a whole, which meant one needed to read or hear it in one setting to see Mark's complete story. The gospel of Mark is structured in two sections of roughly equal length. The first section ends at Mark 8:21 and the second

³⁶Ibid., 608.

³⁷Patrick Flanagan, *The Gospel of Mark Made Easy* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 21.

section begins at Mark 8:34. Flanagan calls the Mark 8:22-33 passage the linchpin as it ends the first section and begins the second section.³⁸

The gospel according to Mark chapter 4 is a gospel narrative sermon discourse told through a parable with some intertextuality. The structural analysis of the gospel indicates this discourse falls in the middle of the first act of the drama, the Galilean ministry.³⁹ David Smith asserts that the structure of Mark 4 should be viewed as a complete section as its beginning (4:1-2) and ending (4:33-34) form bookends to the parables. The layout of Jesus' parabolic instruction is a common form in the ancient world known as a chiasm, which is the beginning and ending corresponding to one another.⁴⁰

Adela Collins disagrees that Mark 4 is one complete literary. He cites the following concerns or literary problems of the text. First, Mark 4:10 states that Jesus had people around Him including the twelve who inquired with him about the meaning of the parables (plural). The response in verses 11-12 fits well with this question, but then in verse 13, Jesus gives another response, as if the question had been about the parable (singular): parable of the sower. Secondly, Jesus is sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee addressing a crowd on the shore. Verse 10 shifts to Jesus alone with His disciples. However, verses 33-34 imply that some or all of the material in 21-32 was spoken to the crowd, although no transition from solitude to being with the crowd again was narrated. Thirdly, verse 33 seems to indicate that Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables in order to

³⁸Ibid., 22.

³⁹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary On The Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Press, 2002), 182.

⁴⁰David Smith, *Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 102.

teach them; whereas verses 11-12 state that Jesus spoke in parables in order that “those outside,” including the crowd would not understand. Collins argues that the insiders are equivalent to the disciples, whereas the outsiders are all other people. In essence, he views verses 3-8 as didactic dialogue.⁴¹

Jesus utilizes a parable to address this large crowd that is standing on the seashore. A parable is ultimately derived from Greek word *parabolē*, which is translated literally putting things side by side. David Wenham traces its origin back to the Hebrew and Aramaic word *mashal/mathla*, which gives the connotation of pictorial sayings and stories.⁴² Etymologically it is thus close to allegory, which by derivation means saying things in a different way.⁴³ A parable is the somewhat protracted simile or short descriptive story, usually designed to inculcate a single truth or answer a single question.⁴⁴

Parables in classical Greek literature designate a mode of speech distinguished by its power to convince.⁴⁵ Parables revolve around one main point of comparison between the activity in the story and Jesus’ understanding of the teaching of the kingdom of God.⁴⁶ Jesus in this context is telling an agricultural story in order to convey a message about the kingdom of God. The parables are the appropriate form of communication for bringing to humanity the message of the kingdom, since their function is to jolt them into

⁴¹Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 240.

⁴²Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 12.

⁴³Wood & Marshall *New Bible Dictionary*, 867.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Bible: Mark 1-8* (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 2000), 291.

⁴⁶Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

seeing things in a new way. They are a means of enlightenment and persuasion, intended to bring the hearers to the point of decision. Jesus, as it were, stands where his hearers stand, and uses imagery familiar to them to bring new and unfamiliar insights to them.⁴⁷

The background of this parable is rural life in Palestine in which it was a fragile agricultural economy.⁴⁸ Many of those in the crowd were from an agrarian background in which they would understand the process of agricultural sowing and harvesting. The first century readers were also very familiar with agricultural life. Collins asserts that those educated in Greek and Hellenistic literature and tradition would also recognize the description of sowing and its results as an analogy to or allegory of education.⁴⁹ William Barclay states it was customary for the crowds to follow famous rabbis wherever they went in order to catch the pearls of wisdom which fell from the teachers lips as they walked; hence the large crowd gathering around Jesus according to Mark 4:1 to hear His teachings.⁵⁰

John Mark paints a scene of Jesus using this opportunity as a teaching moment through the use of a parable. “And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine” (Mk 4:2). Soanes and Stevenson translated teach to mean to impart knowledge to or instruct (someone) in how to do something.⁵¹ Arndt, Danker, and Bauerto add the connotation of teaching to provide instruction in a formal or informal

⁴⁷Wood & Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 867.

⁴⁸Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 41.

⁴⁹Collins, *Mark: Hermeneia*, 245.

⁵⁰Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 18.

⁵¹Soanes & Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

setting.⁵² The Greek word used for teach is *didaskō* which is translated as to instruct or preach.⁵³

The equivalent of to teach in many languages is simply a causative form of a verb meaning to learn or to know, for example, to cause to learn or to cause to know.⁵⁴ The verb teach is in the present active tense which corresponds to Jesus Christ as the one who is actively engaged in telling the parable as a form of teaching/preaching with the purpose of the crowd and His disciples to learn about the kingdom of God. The author of Mark uses a derivative of teaches in verse 2, which expresses the authority of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is presented in the New Testament Gospels as a teacher (Gk. *didaskalos*) or rabbi (Mk 4:38; 9:5; Jn 1:38), teaching (*didaskein*) with authority (Mk 1:22; Lk 4:32).⁵⁵ The parable describes reactions to Jesus' preaching of the kingdom (cf. Mk 1:15). This parable also differs from the others in that it alone is accompanied by an explanation.

The references to the lake, the large crowd, and the boat reach back to Mark 3:7-12. Here the boat serves not as a means of escape but as a pulpit.⁵⁶ Jesus is there on the Sea of Tiberias teaching while the crowd is on the land listening. This inland Sea of Tiberias having no tide; had no ebbing and flowing of the waters to disturb them.⁵⁷ The huge crowd on the beach represents various groups of people: eager learners, curious but

⁵²Arndt, Danker & Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament*, 241.

⁵³Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries*.

⁵⁴J. P. Louw, & E. A Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains, Vol. 1* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1996), 413, electronic ed.

⁵⁵M. C. Albl, "Teaching," In *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers & A. B. Beck, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1278).

⁵⁶J. A. Brooks, "Mark" *The New American Commentary*, vol. 23 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 79.

⁵⁷Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Mk 4:1–20.

uncommitted hearers, and rejecting fault-finders.⁵⁸ The Authorized Version says, “A great multitude was gathered unto him.” The Greek adjective, according to the most approved reading, is *πλεῖστος*, the superlative of *πολύς*, and should be rendered a very great multitude. Scholars hypothesize that the crowd had probably been waiting for Jesus in the neighborhood of Capernaum.⁵⁹ Also, included in the crowd are the disciples of Jesus.

The quantitative and qualitative use of the word *hearken* is clearly observed. *Hearken* is strategically placed at the opening and closing of the parable being told to the crowd. “Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow; and he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear”(Mk 4:9). This word, *hearken*, is introduced in St. Mark’s narrative only; and it is very suitable to the warning at verse 9, “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”⁶⁰

The New Revised Standard Version translates *hearken* to be interpreted as to listen. Soanes and Stevenson affirm this translation as they trace it back to the Old English word *heorcnian*, which is probably related to the word *hark* which means to pay close attention or listen.⁶¹ *Hearken* is used in the present tense active imperative second person plural voice which expresses the divine imperative for the crowd to listen or pay close attention to this teaching moment. The crowd’s comprehension of the parable is the result of the juxtaposition of their listening.

⁵⁸T. J. Geddert, “Mark,” *Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 92.

⁵⁹*The Pulpit Commentary: St. Mark vol. 1.* H. D. M. Spence-Jones, eds., (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2004), 155–156.

⁶⁰*The Pulpit Commentary: St. Mark*, 156.

⁶¹Soanes & Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

The parable begins and ends (v. 9) with an admonition to listen thoughtfully, which shows that the meaning of parables is not always self-evident.⁶² Those with hearing ears will understand Jesus' teaching about the secretly arriving reign of God (theme 1).⁶³ Case in point, France subscribes to the notion that this sermon discourse is about hearing. "Such a concentration of attention on the verb hearken throughout the discourse not only draws the hearer's attention but tells us that this is a discourse about hearing, and that the division between insiders and outsiders is connected with how each group can hear the word."⁶⁴

Jesus commences this parable by sharing that a farmer/sower went out to sow some seeds and how the different environments produced varying results. The infinitive to sow, which is *sperai* in the Greek indicates purpose. The methodology of the farmer/sower was one who scattered the seeds over the soil as the sower walked through the field. In ancient Palestine, the sower did not drop each seed individually in a hole previously dug for that purpose.⁶⁵ According to Mark 4:3, seeds were sown in broadcast fashion. The farmer/sower deliberately sowed it on the path (vs. 4), in rocky places (vs. 5), and among the thorns (vs. 7) because sowing preceded plowing.⁶⁶ Moreover, in this parable, it shows that greater emphasis is placed on what happened to the seeds than the person or methodology of the planting.

⁶²J. A. Brooks, "Mark," *The New American Commentary*, vol. 23 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers 1991), 79.

⁶³Geddert, *Believers Church Bible Commentary*, 92.

⁶⁴France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 184-85.

⁶⁵Eugene Nida and Robert Bratcher, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (Leiden, UK: Brill Pub., 1961), 128.

⁶⁶Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 615.

The birds refer to undomesticated songbirds or wild birds and not a domesticated fowl (vs. 4). The seeds in verse 7 did not fall among thorns but rather fell where thorns had been growing or where there were roots of thorn plants. In Kekchi, the phrase grew up and choked is translated as the thorns grew up and made a shadow thus preventing the growth of the grain.⁶⁷

Some have found Mark 4:10-12 very difficult to understand; for it seems to suggest that Jesus' purpose in the parables was not to enlighten the unenlightened, but that the unbeliever might become hardened in his unbelief. It is possible, however, that what seems to be a clause of purpose in Mark 4:12 is in fact a clause of consequence (see Mt 13:13). The parables of Jesus may have the effect of hardening the unbeliever, just as Isaiah prophesied with regard to the effects of preaching the Word of God.⁶⁸ The problem of those outside is that their hearing is ineffective (v. 12), and the interpretation of the parable of the sower will go on to explain the fate of each of the four types of seed in terms of what happens when the λόγος is 'heard' (vv. 15, 16, 18, 20).⁶⁹ Secret which is *mysterion* in the Greek means God's disclosure to man of what was previously unknown. Those who have faith understand it. The secret has been given to the disciples because they have responded in faith, but to those on the outside (unbelievers due to hardened hearts—chapter 3) all things are in parables. The best translation of parable in this context is riddle.

Interestingly, this parable comes with an allegorical interpretation. However, much scholastic dialogue and deliberation has occurred over its interpretation. Gaebelein

⁶⁷Nida and Bratcher, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*, 131.

⁶⁸Wood & Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 869.

⁶⁹France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 184.

identifies the farmer/sower as Christ who is an agent of God. James Wiggins sees the sower as the Holy Spirit or an evangelist used to preach God's word.⁷⁰ Blomberg states that the imagery of God as sower was standard in Jewish circles.⁷¹ Both Gaebelein and Wiggins agree that the seeds are the word of God, specifically the Word of the Kingdom of God. Wiggins sees the bird as symbolic of Satan whose chief responsibility is to snatch away the Word of God. The path represents those who hear the Gospel and have no significant reaction to it because they do not understand the message, and Satan takes it away.⁷²

Barclay is in harmony with Gaebelein and Wiggins that the centrality of this parable is about the preaching of the kingdom and the people's response to that preaching. Gaebelein offers the following interpretation of the receptors of the word of the kingdom. First, there is shallow reception, which is like seed sown on the hard-beaten path (vs. 15). In Palestine, the common ground of long narrow strips had such heavy traffic flow that the ground became very hard which prevented seeds from penetrating it. Satan, who snatches the word from the recipients before it has had an opportunity to take root, highlights this reception.

Secondly, there is the reception through persecution and trials. This rocky ground or soil was synonymous to the places in Palestine where there was only a skin of earth over limestone rock. The seeds on this soil had no depth and would sprout quickly. This word was a very relevant word to the Roman Church and probably sounded a warning to any who, because of persecution and trials, may have been thinking of defecting from the

⁷⁰James Wiggins, *What Did Jesus Teach?* (United States: James R. Wiggins, 2010, 2.

⁷¹Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 226.

⁷²Ibid., 2.

faith. Those who defect have no root in themselves and they are like seeds sown on rocky places (vs. 16).

The third classification was the receptors like seed sown among thorns. In this particular ground or soil, the seeds of the weeds were present. The weeds were categorized as being stronger than the good seeds. Like the good seeds in the parable, the recipients seem to make good progress but the word is choked out by the worries of this life.

Lastly, Gaebelein calls these receptors seeds that fall on good soil and are productive. This ground or soil allows depth for the seed to penetrate and take root and then grow in a nutrient enriched environment. These recipients are open and receptive to the word of the kingdom. They are not hard, shallow, or preoccupied.⁷³

Blomberg argues that the three unfruitful soils are pitted against the fruitful one, and the sower is the unifying figure or third main character.⁷⁴ Blomberg agrees with form critics that this parable is a three-point parable. First, God is akin to the sower from the perspective that He spreads His word widely among all kinds of people. Next, there will be varying responses to God's word as depicted in the three kinds of unfruitful soil. Lastly, like the fruitful soil, the only legitimate response to God's word is the obedience and perseverance, which demonstrate true regeneration.⁷⁵ The thirty, sixty, and hundred-fold harvest seems to refer to the abundance of fruit. Barclay disagrees with Blomberg about this interpretation about the thirty, sixty, and hundred fold. He asserts that it

⁷³Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 619-620.

⁷⁴Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 226.

⁷⁵Ibid., 228.

describes the yield of productive parts of the field, not the overall return on the total seed sown.⁷⁶

James Wiggins states that though the proclamation of the parable was public, the explanation of the parable was done privately to his disciples.⁷⁷ What stood out was the dual platform of the parable. The sermon discourse on the seashore is analogous to the sermon proclamation in the pulpits. The word is preached for everyone in attendance with an understanding that all four soils are present in the congregation. Though the sermon is proclaimed publicly, this small group of disciples revealed that a platform is needed for dialogue and discussion about the full interpretation of the sermon discourse. In the words of Solomon, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: And with all thy getting get understanding” (Prv 4:7). Therefore, this project will explore the impact of sermon-based small groups as the singular discipleship praxis in the Black church.

The New Testament is full of examples in which sermon-based small groups were utilized for discipleship. First, in Acts 2:42-47, the early church met in each others’ homes to listen to the apostles teaching. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” In Acts 17, the church of Berea was known for the small groups that met after the synagogue teachings for more in-depth study of the sermon in which they just heard. “Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11) Acts 20:20 is another example of Christian disciples who met in homes to dig

⁷⁶Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 43.

⁷⁷Wiggins, *What Did Jesus Teach?*, 1.

deeper in the word in which they had heard in public. “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.” These examples, coupled with Joshua 1 and Mark 4 are biblical foundations for which this project will employ in its pedagogical assessment of sermon-based small groups.

Historical Foundation

The impact and integration of small groups has existed throughout the early history of society. The small groups were a paramount way of family and faith life. Small groups developed and maintained culture within culture. Also, they instilled and passed down family values, developed their language of communication, and were the epicenter of their spiritual engagement and empowerment. Small groups have been instrumental in shaping the landscape and life of a community, especially the church community. This project seeks to reveal small groups’ historical influence on shaping the faith development of the religious community. The purpose of the proposed study is to ascribe sermon-based small groups as the preferred method of discipleship in the Black church. This study will discuss the historical impact of sermon based small groups and the proposed benefits they can have in the Black church.

Small groups can be viewed throughout history via different telescopic lenses: tribes, villages, communities, or a select group of individuals. One of the earliest examples of small groups can be traced through the biblical tradition of tribes. According to Warren Matthews, God summoned Abram in the third millennium BCE to leave the land of Ur of the Chaldeans and go to the land of Canaan.⁷⁸ This dispensation of time is

⁷⁸Warren Matthews, *World Religions* (St Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1991), 267.

referred to as the patriarchal age. The setting of life for Abraham and his family was one tribal in nature. Abraham lived among his family and relatives in tents in the dessert and normally migrated during times of droughts.

The Lord said to Abram: Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there" (Gn 12:1-5).

The Hebrew community was organized into tribes consisting of clans, which were further divided into individual families. The male head of the tribe was determined by birthright. He was the voice of authority. The women were the caretakers of the family tent. Their primary function was procreation to assure the continuation of the tribe.⁷⁹

Around 1750 BC, Jacob and his family settled in Egypt where his son Joseph was the prime minister. During this time, the nation of Israel was divided into twelve tribes: Reuben, Simeon, Asher, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Manasseh, and Ephraim. The exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt occurred around 1300 BC. It has been estimated that the Hebrew population at this time was over 1,000,000 people.⁸⁰ Two years after the Israelites entered into the wilderness after leaving Egypt, Moses ordered a census of the people based upon their clans, tribes, and ancestral houses.

The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. He said: "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. You and Aaron are to count according to their divisions all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army. One man from each tribe, each of them the head of his family, is to help you (Num 1:1-4).

For centuries, tribalism was a part of the Hebraic life and culture. Tribalism was also important in the spiritual life of the nation of Israel. When it was time to prepare for

⁷⁹Alice Cochran, Norvin Hein, & others, *Religions of the World* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1983), 402-403.

⁸⁰Matthews, *World Religions*, 270.

the conquest of Canaan, God spoke to Joshua and stated that He was giving Joshua and the people the land that was promised to Abraham. In return, Joshua summoned the officers of the camps to share with each tribe that they were to consecrate and prepare themselves for battle. “Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, Pass through the camp, and command the people: ‘Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess.’ To the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said” (Jo 1:10-12). After the Israelites entered and conquered the land of Canaan, the land was divided among tribal territories. “So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war” (Jo 11:23). The success of this small group or tribal experience was witnessed in the transference of divine communication.

In the New Testament, there was a transition from a tribal focus to disciples, crowds, multitudes, and households. In the gospels, Jesus selected twelve disciples in which He trained, taught, empowered, modeled ministry, prayed with and for, as well as explained parables. “These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him” (Mt 10:2-4). Mark 4 is a great example of how Jesus used small groups in the spiritual formation of His disciples.

Jesus preached a sermon to the crowd using a parable about the soils. After the conclusion of the sermon, the disciples (small group) inquired of Jesus about the interpretation of the sermon. “When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables” (Mk: 10). While in the small group, Jesus clarified the meaning of the sermon in which they heard.

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold (Mk 4:13-20).

In the book of Acts, there is the theme of household salvation (10:2; 11:14; 16:14-15; 18:8). These settings normally took place in homes or in locales of small groups in which the household (small group) received the gospel of salvation. Also in the book of Acts, the church (Greek ecclesia) was birthed on the Day of Pentecost. The new converts met in the synagogues for worship as well as in people’s homes for teaching. Small groups quickly became a method of discipleship and of administering spiritual disciplines (Acts 2, 13, 20) in the 1st century church.

From the early 16th century, tribalism or small groups have been a critical component for the social, spiritual, educational, communal, and communication center of Africans. Africans believed that a person could only achieve happiness by being part of a group. From birth to death the African is always part of a group. A famous African

proverb states, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, take others along.” This motif was at the pinnacle of the tribal life in Africa.⁸¹

Throughout the continent of Africa, people were known by and land was divided based upon tribes. Historians have estimated 600 to 1000 different tribal groups or more in Africa. Some of the notable tribes are Ashanti, Fanti, Kikuyu, Ibo, Masai, Watsui, Zulu, Yoruba, Hausa, and Fulani to name a few.⁸² A tribe may be thought of as a group of people who share the same customs and language and who believe that they have descended from a common ancestor. They all speak the same language, of course, and they regard their village and tribal territory as belonging to all of them. Their religious practice was communal and pluralistic.⁸³

The African tribe consists of grandparents, aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, their children and children’s children, first cousins, second cousins, third cousins, and even more distant cousins. The human mediator typically was the leader or the priest/priestess of a family and/or tribe.⁸⁴ It is very common for the relatives to reside in the same house. The children are taught, during their adolescent development, the expectations of being a good member of the tribe. It is the parental responsibility to teach and train their children the laws and customs of the tribe. Most African boys are made members in their villages at age twelve or thirteen.

⁸¹Michael Jones , “Capacity Building” (lecture, DeVous Urban Leadership Initiative, Pompano Beach, Florida, January 24, 2009).

⁸²History Teacher, “Reading African Tribalism, accessed Jan 2014), [www.historyteacher.net/Readings/ Reading-AfricanTribalism.doc](http://www.historyteacher.net/Readings/Reading-AfricanTribalism.doc).

⁸³Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 24-25.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 33.

Tribal villages are viewed as a safe haven. Individuals are very close and are instructed not to live in isolation or abandon one's family. Many ancestral tribes received a tribal mark which was usually a cut made on the face in a particular way or pattern. It was in this village life that narrative stories and words of wisdom were shared with the family from the elder statesman. If there were any ambiguity in what was shared, they were free to ask questions of clarity in this group setting.

Dating back to the middle 1600's, the Puritan's appeal for spiritual renewal and adherence to strict morality began to have impact and influence on the Protestant faith in the European continent. The Pietists, led by Philipp Jakob Spener and August Hermann Francke, began to organize believers into small groups or what they referred to as conventicles.⁸⁵ Spener utilized Martin Bucer's terminology *collegia pietatis*, which is the college of piety to discuss the scriptures in depth.⁸⁶ These groups met in homes to study the scriptures and share testimonies. The Moravians and Zinzendorf, specifically of the Pietists, had a profound impact and influence on John Wesley. The Moravians were pioneers of the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* which were small groups designed to deal with the spiritual and interpersonal life of the community.⁸⁷ The discussion groups typically centered around catechisms or devotional books.

In 1729, the Moravian Pietist movement influenced John Wesley to join a small group led by his brother Charles Wesley known as The Holy Club. The members of this small group met daily from six to nine o'clock in the evening for Bible study and

⁸⁵Paul W. Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 80.

⁸⁶Gwang Seok Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 93.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 106.

discussion of other religious books. The frequency of the meetings was Wesley's idea of recapturing the strict discipline of devotion of the early church that met daily to listen to the apostles' teaching. Later, they expanded the scope of their spiritual formation to include visitation of those who were sick, incarcerated, and poor, widows, and orphans.⁸⁸

The De Renty Model established by Catholic nobleman De Renty also impacted Wesley's framework for small groups. Wesley incorporated the following components of this model:

1. A daily, detailed examination of that day's accomplishments and errors.
2. The establishment of little gatherings of devout people who met weekly for prayer, reading devotional books, distribution of food to the poor, and discussion of personal religious experience.
3. A zeal for personal holiness expressed in individual conduct and in practical service to others.⁸⁹

In 1739 in London, England, small groups began to be on the incline. John Wesley described this transition as people who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. He described the small groups as "a company of men having the form of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."⁹⁰

In Wesley's day, the small groups were referred to as classes. These classes consisted of about twelve persons according to their respective places of abode. Small

⁸⁸Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, 127.

⁸⁹D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 48-49.

⁹⁰Robert W. Burtner, & Robert E. Chiles, *John Wesley's Theology: A Collection From His Works* (Nashville, TN: Parthenon Press, 1954), 258.

groups became one of the tenants of the Wesleyan tradition of discipleship. He went on record to say that the secret of early Methodism was small groups: “little churches within the church.”⁹¹ Trustworthy individuals who were appointed by John Wesley led these small groups or classes. Chilcote asserts that most of these leaders were lay members who acted as pastoral links between thousands of members within local religious societies and John Wesley.⁹² These small groups or class meetings were a means of weekly examination of spiritual disciplines and correction.⁹³ Wesley charged the leaders to inquire about how individual’s souls were prospering. This inquiry was to be completed in conjunction with advising, reproofing, comforting, exhorting, and the receiving of financial gifts.⁹⁴ The class leader was responsible for spiritual oversight and pastoral care for others. Overall, the expectation was for the small group community to offer an atmosphere in which all members lifted each other in truth and honesty and to accept correction.⁹⁵

Moreover, Wesley was reared in a system of accountable spiritual formation. Their house was often referred to as a small private boarding school for faith formation.⁹⁶ His mother, Susanna, adopted a practice of family prayers and discussing the sermon and other devotional topics on Sunday evenings. The family devotion time evolved into sermon based small groups. Gwang Oh states that Susanna would read to them the best

⁹¹Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, 113.

⁹²Ibid., 171.

⁹³Oh, *John Wesley’s Ecclesiology*, 68.

⁹⁴Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), 178.

⁹⁵Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, 115.

⁹⁶Sondra H. Matthaei, *Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 27.

and most awakening sermons for their discussion.⁹⁷ Wesley's mother emphasized the necessity and seriousness of scholastic diligence in the word of God.

Wesley's childhood experience became one of his assets as an adult when he returned to London after his American mission trip. Wesley returned to a harvest of people who had received the message of salvation under the preaching of George Whitfield. Whitfield became concerned about their discipleship, as he would be returning to America in the distant future. Thousands of people were being saved and Whitfield knew that his calling was more of an evangelist and not a pastor or shepherd. Thus, he turned the ministry over to John Wesley in which the Methodist Society or Methodism commenced.

During Wesley's voyage to Georgia, he experimented with small groups. Wesley and his group met on Sunday afternoons for exhortation, instruction, correction, and more intensive training.⁹⁸ Now in Europe, Wesley began to use this small group/class model to disciple these new converts.⁹⁹ Wesley would not leave an area in which he preached without establishing small groups for these new converts to grow spiritually.¹⁰⁰ Richard Heitzenrater, in his assessment, states that Wesley discovered that disciples who were not nurtured after experiencing an awakening produced little fruits of one's faith.

Wesley's conclusion was that preaching the gospel alone could not sustain human

⁹⁷Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology*, 134.

⁹⁸Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 44.

⁹⁹Rupert Davies, & Gordon Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1965), 52.

¹⁰⁰Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, 113.

response to God's transforming grace. Therefore, Wesley organized small groups to accompany the preaching in faith formation.¹⁰¹

Wesley viewed small groups or class meetings as the pulse of Methodism. Wesley stressed the importance of the church's role in the faith formation of the disciples. He believed that church bore the responsibility of "nurturing and supporting human efforts to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit for ongoing growth in faith, including holding a person accountable for faith and life."¹⁰² These groups were the setting in which the teachings of the Bible were examined in light of actual personal experience. The only prerequisite for the small groups was salvation and a commitment to grow in their faith. Wesley views it as such, "A desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins."¹⁰³

Wesley created three strands of discipleship in the structure of Methodism: societies, classes, and bands. The societies are synonymous to worship services in which people gathered to pray, sing, and for scriptural engagement. Wesley described those present at the societies as "a company of people having the form, and seeking the power of godliness." He likened this unto the multitude that followed Jesus and listened to His teachings. The societies would be similar to present day congregations.

The classes were composed of twelve to twenty members who met weekly for accountability for growing in holiness and the confession of sin. The classes were predominantly held in homes or at the meetinghouse. Class meetings were mandatory for

¹⁰¹Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 34.

¹⁰²Ibid., 28.

¹⁰³Introduction to Methodist Accountability Discipleship Groups, accessed August 25, 2013), http://www.goforthall.org/articles/jw_dscplshp.html.

each member of the society whose original intent shifted from stewardship offerings to spiritual formation and discipleship.¹⁰⁴ Wesley also wanted the converts to grow in a disciplined life of loving service.¹⁰⁵ Wesley was an advocate for personal and social holiness in which he selected leaders to assist in this charge.

The main purpose of the classes was to bring about a behavioral change through the engagement of “understanding in practical terms to the messages they had heard preached in the public society meeting.” The community of believers serves as witness to expose delusional self-images and rationalization of behavior as well as view one another’s strengths and giftedness.¹⁰⁶ D. Michael Henderson contends that the class meeting matrix encapsulated several New Testament Christians: personal growth within the context of an intimate fellowship, accountability for spiritual stewardship, bearing one another’s burdens, and speaking the truth in love.¹⁰⁷ Case in point, the class meetings were the hubs of making disciples. The classes could be compared to Jesus’ twelve disciples. Dwight L. Moody affirmed the class meetings as the best institution for training converts the world ever saw.¹⁰⁸

Wesley described his authorial intent of the classes in the following context:

1. Inspect a disciple’s outward walk.
2. Inquire into a disciple’s inward state.

¹⁰⁴Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 133.

¹⁰⁵Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, 113.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰⁷Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, 118-119.

¹⁰⁸Charles L. Goodell, *The Drillmaster of Methodism: Principles and Methods for the Class Leader and Pastor* (New York, NY: Eaton and Mains, 1902), 15.

3. Be informed of the disciple's trial and learn of his/her success or failure.
4. Instruct the ignorant in the principles of religion.
5. Repeat, explain, or enforce what has been said in public preaching.¹⁰⁹

The bands were composed of four members of the same sex, age, and marital status who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of motive. The bands were the training ground for future leaders in Methodism. Wesley broke these small groups down by gender due to the intimacy of the group and his authorial intent to minimize temptation. The bands were synonymous to the inner circle disciples of Jesus: Peter, James, and John.¹¹⁰ Wesley had weekly accountability questions that were posed at every meeting. Wesley or the leader would ask the following questions:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt, whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret? (this one was optional).¹¹¹

Wesley also viewed the nuclear family as a small group with the head of the household bearing a responsibility for spiritual growth and development for the family. The parents were instructed to meet with their children weekly “to talk to them, pray with them, and instruct them.”¹¹² Wesley and other clergy would often make visits to the

¹⁰⁹Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, 111.

¹¹⁰Introduction to Methodist Accountability Discipleship Groups.

¹¹¹Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 118-119.

¹¹²Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 2nd edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 355.

homes of the families to inspect and assess their spiritual growth. The home visits to the families would conclude with the family being charged to assemble every Sunday prior to bed and share what they learned from the sermon.¹¹³ Thus, families were embodying the core of sermon-based small group structure.

Just as spiritual renewal was taking place in Europe, America was also experiencing one as well. George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards were the pioneers of this Great Awakening in the 18th century. Even though America was experiencing a spiritual renewal and revival, it was still a place of slavery and segregation. Since 1619, slaves were imported from Africa to work the colonies of the America.¹¹⁴ Woodson further asserts that Negroes were brought from the African wilds to build the infrastructure and be the laboring class of America.

Slave owners had determined that Negroes should not be educated.¹¹⁵ African Americans, who were called Blacks or Negroes at that time, were not considered to be citizens of the United States. The Church of England was not in support of the spiritual conversion of slaves as many held to the ancient principles of the prohibition of Christians from holding fellow believers in slavery. In 1667, a law was established stating baptism did not alter a slave's condition.

During the apex of the Great Awakening, illiteracy was extremely high and common for the Negroes. Negroes for the most part did not have Bibles and were forced

¹¹³John Wesley, *Minutes of Several Conversations, Works (Jackson) volume 8* (1744-1789), (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing), 305-306.

¹¹⁴Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), 219.

¹¹⁵Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (Washington, DC: Public Domain Books, 1919), 13.

to memorize scriptures that they heard in church services or revival meetings. Wilmore ascribed that the Black preachers at this time had learned the Bible by heart.¹¹⁶ The main theological issue for Negroes during this time was how could hope remain alive in the world of Jim Crow segregation.¹¹⁷ Negroes heard that America was the land of the free but also heard sermons that contradicted this reality for them. Negroes, who were forced to sit in balconies, galleries, or spaces reserved in the back of the church, listened to sermons that were saturated with the biblical passages that supported slavery (Ex 21; Eph 6; 1 Tm 6; and Lk 12).¹¹⁸ According to Coleman, congregational segregation reached its apex when masters and slaves belong to the same denomination but attended services at different times. The Anglo-Saxons attended church on Sunday morning. Blacks attended church on Sunday afternoons.¹¹⁹

Pinn noted that many Christian colonists used Genesis 9 for the theological rationale of slavery. “And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (Gn 9:24-25). The colonists understood slavery as an extension or fulfillment of this biblical mandate and thus preached these sermons to reinforce this theological framework to slaves.¹²⁰ The slaves were confined physically and ideologically as they were immersed in the teachings of the fundamentals of Euro-

¹¹⁶Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 28.

¹¹⁷James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 2.

¹¹⁸ Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 87.

¹¹⁹Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, 95.

¹²⁰Anne & Anthony Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 2.

American interpretation of Christianity.¹²¹ Frederick Douglass advised many slaves to decipher the difference between the true gospel of Christ and the teachings of planters and plantation missionaries.¹²² Pinn shared the testimony of a former slave who expressed how slaves would meet to have their own spiritual encounters and experiences with God to gain spiritual insight.

We used to slip off in de woods in de old slave days on Sunday evening way down in de swamps to sing and pray to our own liking. We prayed for dis of freedom. We come from four and five miles away to pray together to God dat if we don't live to see it, do please let our chillun live to see a better day and be free, so dat dey can give honest and fair service to de Lord and all mankind everywhere.¹²³

Nat Turner in his reflection of his slave experience recalled hearing scriptures at the meetings but later having to pray for understanding and clarity. He even appealed to asking the Holy Spirit for illumination of the Scriptures.¹²⁴ This was very common for slaves to hear sermonic messages and then meet at the camp sides to share their faith and reinterpret the sermon in light of lived experience and context. These riverside or camp meetings would be very similar to the New Testament and John Wesley's model of small groups gathering for spiritual edification of the sermon they heard. The Quakers were advocates for the Negroes to improve their literacy so they would have the ability to "read their own instruction in The Book of The Law that they might be wise unto salvation."¹²⁵

The camp side prayer meetings allowed the slaves to have limited control over their own environment, to create their own invisible institution. Will Coleman contends

¹²¹Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, 90-91.

¹²²Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History*, 12.

¹²³ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁴Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Baltimore, MD: Thomas R. Gray, 1831), 100.

¹²⁵Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, 48.

that power of the secret prayer meetings laid the foundation for the African American church as an independent social, economic, and political institution within a predominantly Euro-American society.”¹²⁶ The late 18th century witnessed the birth of the Negro church. Between 1775-1778, the Silver Bluff Baptist Church was established in Silver Bluff, South Carolina.¹²⁷ Several years later, in 1787, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and other black worshipers withdrew from St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church.¹²⁸ The pillar and strength of both of these early churches were their prayer meetings and Sunday school. The Black church as it became known had an unwavering commitment to learning the Bible in these small group settings.

During the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968), the Black church and its preachers were at the forefront of the campaign for equality and desegregation. Joseph Washington states that the Black minister, especially the Baptist minister, was expected to farther the local news and circulate it through his sermons on Sunday.¹²⁹ Wilmore asserts that the strength and success of the movement was the gathering of the small groups at the church to offer prayer and seek direction from God.¹³⁰ These small groups gathered throughout the United States with a full pledge support for freedom.

¹²⁶Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, 39.

¹²⁷C. Eric Lincoln, & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in The African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 23.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹²⁹Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), 2.

¹³⁰Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 205.

Washington adds that these meetings were held in church buildings and were presided by the ministers.¹³¹

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., leader of Southern Christian Leadership Conference, publicly stated that strength of the fight was in the small group affiliates in town after town. As King traveled to these meetings, he described them as some of the most spirit filled services in which he had to continue to clarify their message and position of non-violence. King stated that these small groups were constructed and centralized around the Sermon on the Mount, which talked extensively about Christian love. Though many of the pastors preached love and non-violence, these small group gatherings were necessary to refocus many of them who wanted to go in a different direction.¹³²

Small groups still remain an integral part of the church today. Small groups have been predominantly utilized in the Anglo church. Some have substituted the terminology cell groups for small groups. Cell groups consist of at least twelve people with a leader facilitating the group. Saddleback Church has been utilizing small groups since 1980. They define small groups as “A subset (6-16 people) of the church body that meets on Sunday. Small groups meet in non-church locations such as homes, restaurants, coffee shops, businesses or any location that is convenient for the attendees.”¹³³ Their biblical platform for small groups is Acts 5:42 “Day after day, in the temple courts (weekend celebration) and from house to house (small group fellowships), they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

¹³¹Washington, *Black Religion*, 3.

¹³²Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 211.

¹³³Saddleback Small Groups, accessed December 2, 2013, <http://www.saddleback.com/lakeforest/adults/smallgrouplife/faq/>.

North Coast Church is another Anglo church that has utilized small groups as their method of discipleship since 1982. Pastor Larry Osborne calls the church a church of small groups with these groups being the “hub of the ministry.”¹³⁴ Osborne calls these small groups, growth groups. The growth groups are sermon-based only. Osborne made the transition to sermon-based only group because he felt it offered more upside to study one thing and study it well rather than studying various topics and curriculum.¹³⁵

Small groups have proven to be successful and have had a major impact in church retention as well as spiritual growth. The landscape of churches in the past twenty years has transitioned from community churches to commuter churches. George Barna classifies small groups as the cornerstone of the development process of churches.¹³⁶ He further elaborates that these home-based groups meet the modern day disciple needs as many of the congregants reside in different demographics and have different work and personal schedules. Small groups offer the flexibility instead of the traditional standard night option of Bible study. Osborne states that the transition to small groups has allowed North Coast Church to witness 80 percent of the weekend worshippers attending and participating in a small group.¹³⁷ Statistics demonstrate that small groups are attractive to the Millennials, meaning individuals born between 1980-2000. Rainer states that 20 percent of this generation is involved in a small group Bible study.¹³⁸ Saddleback Church

¹³⁴North Coast Church, “Our History,” accessed December 5, 2013, http://www.northcoastchurch.com/welcome/service_times/our_history/.

¹³⁵Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2008), 60.

¹³⁶George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 121.

¹³⁷Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 21.

¹³⁸Jess and Thom Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 47.

has become a pioneer in reaching Millennials, young families, and individuals with demanding work schedules through the utilization of online small groups.

Even though small groups have been a part of the global society since early biblical times, home-based small groups are an abnormality in the Black church. Since 2009, Concord Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas has incorporated sermon-based small groups into discipleship ministry. However, Concord still has a Wednesday night service, which includes praying, preaching, and teaching. After the teaching is presented, the attendees are then instructed to form small groups to further discuss the material presented. Also, Concord utilizes station-in-life curriculum for a small portion of its small groups life.

This project would like to explore the Sticky Church model offered by Larry Osborne in which sermon-based small groups are the only form of discipleship. Osborne argues that competition must be eliminated if the small group experience is going to reach its apex.¹³⁹ Osborne also asserts that the setting has a major impact on the quality of the groups. He argues that people are more comfortable and willing to share in a living room than a classroom or sanctuary.¹⁴⁰ The New Testament is full of models in which Christian believers met in homes for their discipleship to dig deeper into the teachings. This project seeks to investigate the impact of sermon-based only small groups in the Black church and follow the Jesus, early church and Wesleyan examples.

¹³⁹Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 92-94.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 53.

Theological Foundation

Anthropology is the study of humanity and how it addresses the reality of who we are. Another way of raising this theological motif is to carefully examine God's intended design and depiction of humanity when we were created in God's image. According to Migliore, anthropology is best understood through Imago Dei terminology.¹⁴¹ This fundamental truth is that God is in humanity not as an abstract, but as the Imago Dei in man. James Evans asserts that this premise means being fully human is an extension of a divine act that is based on the revelation of God.¹⁴² On March 10, 2006 during a lecture, John Kinney defined the Imago Dei as rational, moral, social, and spiritual aspects of God.

Autobiographical is the commencement of comprehending anthropology.¹⁴³ Humanity raises two distinct and significant questions: First, who are we? And second, what was the original design of humanity when we were created in God's image? Musser and Price, in their approach to the image of God, categorize the Imago Dei from four perspectives: rationality, responsibility for the earth, human conscience, and being relational.¹⁴⁴

First, rationality is seen as humanity having the ability and capacity to live by art and reason, which places them above animals who merely live off memories and appearances. Case in point, humans are logical and rational beings with the capacity to

¹⁴¹Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 139-149.

¹⁴²James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 76.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴⁴Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, *Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 30-31.

think and reason, which scripture states are a part of God's nature. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD"(Is 55:8) Sermon-based small groups provide a platform for humanity to embrace and express their rational cognizance. One of the admiral attributes of small groups is its uniqueness to solicit the participants' interpretative analysis of the sermon and to extrapolate it's meaning into lived experience.¹⁴⁵

Secondly, according to Genesis 1:26, after making humanity in His image, God gave humans authority, rule, and dominion over the earth. Therefore, humanity has a responsibility to care for the Lord's creation and creatures. The construction of small groups appeals to the strength of the human responsibility. The facilitator of the group is viewed as a mini-shepherd who has the responsibility to care for its participants and to hold them accountable to each other.¹⁴⁶ The groups normally have a missional emphasis. Small groups are encouraged and expected to serve the community and care for creation.¹⁴⁷

Thirdly, Musser and Price state that embedded in humanity is the moral awareness of a human conscience that allows one to distinguish between good and bad, right and evil. They ascribed this ability as a trademark of the Imago Dei. In addition, God communicates with humanity through our conscience, and the reasoning is so loud that we seem to hear a voice. Evans defines conscience in this manner as part of the soul, which again sets humanity apart from other creation. "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man

¹⁴⁵Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 42-44.

¹⁴⁶Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition*, 171.

¹⁴⁷Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 90.

became a living being” (Gn 2:7) Guthrie defines the soul as the spiritual or divine part of humanity.¹⁴⁸ John Wesley used class meetings, his version of small groups, to emphasize soul care. Wesley encouraged leaders to ask weekly questions about soul accountability, which was a direct appeal to the human conscience.¹⁴⁹

Fourthly, the image of God denotes the necessity to be relational. Evans argues that humans must interact with each other in order to achieve the fullness of their potential. He further asserts that there is no substitute for the fullness of life apart from the group.¹⁵⁰ The scripture bears witness in support of Evans, Musser, and Price’s theological and pedagogical assessment about humanity being made relational beings. “Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gn 2:18). Jesus reiterates this theological framework in His declaration that the greatest commandment is to love God with all ones heart, mind, soul, and strength and then to love ones neighbor as oneself. The writer of Hebrews advocates for Christian believers to interact and live interdependently. “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Gn 2:7).

Small groups are also referred to as life groups, community groups, growth groups, or cell groups. Small groups normally range in size from six to sixteen individuals depending on the station-in-life focus. These groups are assembled based on the understanding that humanity needs to be relational. One of the fundamental pillars of

¹⁴⁸ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 195.

¹⁴⁹ Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 96-97.

¹⁵⁰ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 101.

the Sticky Church sermon-based model is to build Christ-centered relationships.¹⁵¹ Rainer lobbies that the best connectors in religious institutions are relationships.¹⁵² In essence, small groups factor into the anthropological needs in which this study will reveal its effectiveness.

The early church continued this rich historical tradition of being relational. Ecclesiology is the doctrine of the church, which manifests the social dimension of faith. Arndt and Bauer define the church (Greek: ἐκκλησία *ekklēsia*) as an assembly, a regularly summoned legislative body, gathering, or people with shared beliefs such as a congregation.¹⁵³ Etymologically church means, “to call out.”¹⁵⁴ Carlyle Marney sees the Christian church as a community of witnesses, which confesses Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father.¹⁵⁵ Soanes and Stevenson define ecclesiology as the study of churches or the theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian Church.¹⁵⁶ The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed characterizes the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, while the Apostles’ Creed speaks of “the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 43.

¹⁵²Jess & Thom Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 105.

¹⁵³Arndt, Danker, Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 303.

¹⁵⁴Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm Eerdmans Publishing, 1938), 1471.

¹⁵⁵Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 16-17.

¹⁵⁶Soanes & Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 1, s.v. “Ecclesiology.”

¹⁵⁷Fahlbusch & Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 477- 478.

The first use of the word church occurs in the Gospels. In the Old Testament these gatherings normally involved the Israelites at worship, so that precisely such a community surrounding the Messiah had become a standard Jewish expectation.¹⁵⁸

Blomberg further expresses that Jesus is not making implications of any particular church structure or government; he merely promises that he will establish a gathered community of his followers and help them to grow.¹⁵⁹

The commencement of the Christian church as viewed today took place on the Day of Pentecost. “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place” (Acts 2:1). According to church tradition, Pentecost is always about seven weeks after Easter Sunday, or fifty days after Easter, including Easter Day.¹⁶⁰

Eddie Wrenn, in a 2012 investigation from the International Geology Review, cited that researchers derived that the earthquake activity, combined with the Jewish calendar and astronomy clues, indicate that Friday, April 3, 33 AD is the best possible match for the death of Jesus Christ.¹⁶¹ Thus, the birth of the church occurred in 33 AD in the upper room.

Astley, Francis, and Crowder assert that the ecclesial community is second only to the Bible in importance as a foundation of Christian theology. They also argue that the

¹⁵⁸Blomberg, *The New American Commentary*, 252-253.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁶⁰“Pentecost in the United States,” accessed March 5, 2014, www.timeanddate.com.

¹⁶¹Science and Technology, “Jesus Dies on Friday, April, 3 33 AD,” accessed January 14, 2014, www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2149750/Jesus-died-Friday-April-3-33AD-claim-researchers-tie-earthquake-data-gospels-date.html#ixzz24CRoFsBi. “Jesus 'died on Friday, April 3, 33AD'. (May 25, 2012).

church is the principal and essential context for Christian formation and criticism.¹⁶² The early church met daily and built deep-rooted relationships. Many of the early churches met in homes and were assembled around communities.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day-by-day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

- And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:42).
- Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ (Rom 16:5).
- The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord"(1 Cor 16:9).
- Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house(Col. 4:15).

The believers met in homes for spiritual edification and scriptural enlightenment.

Most small groups in today's churches meet predominantly in homes. This small group model is a continuation of the ecclesiastical spirit of the early church. The home environment has been a place of comfort and community. Stanley Hauerwas' hermenutic of the church is one of a social ethic. Hauerwas views the church as a community that can be clearly distinguished from the world where the truth is lived and spoken.¹⁶³

This social ethic is normally a cornerstone in African American preaching. Larue argues that African American preaching has areas of concentration: personal piety, social

¹⁶²Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, & Colin Crowder, *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 95.

¹⁶³Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 18.

justice, corporate concerns, maintenance of the institutional church, and soul care.¹⁶⁴

What is preaching? In his 1877 Beecher Lectures on Preaching, Phillips Brooks defined preaching as “the communication of truth through personality.”¹⁶⁵ On August 23, 2012, Joel Gregory classified preaching as a complex activity.¹⁶⁶ Keck describes preaching as the proclamation of a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-like way.¹⁶⁷ For Fred B. Craddock preaching is “making present and appropriate the revelation of God.”¹⁶⁸ Thomas Long contends that preaching is the task of speaking the glad tidings of God’s redemption of humanity through Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁹ James Wallace maintains that preaching is a call to feed the people of God.¹⁷⁰ William Willimon agrees with Wallace that preaching requires the existence of a community of truth.¹⁷¹

Preaching carries two connotations in the Greek language. First, to preach is rendered as euangelizo (εὐαγγελίζω). Euangelizo refers to the preaching of God’s kingdom and sums up Christ’s life or to announce good news. Arndt, Danker, and Bauer further add that preaching is to proclaim the divine message of salvation through the

¹⁶⁴Cleophus LaRue, *I Believe I’ll Testify* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2009), 64-69.

¹⁶⁵Charles W. Fuller, *The Trouble With “Truth Through Personality”* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 10.

¹⁶⁶ Joel Gregory, “Organic Illustrations and Lived Experience” (lecture, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, August 23, 2012).

¹⁶⁷Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), 106.

¹⁶⁸Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching: An Overview* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 51.

¹⁶⁹Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 13.

¹⁷⁰James A. Wallace, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and within the Rites* (Collegeville, MD: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 27.

¹⁷¹William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 65-66.

gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁷² The goal of preaching in this context is to stir up faith in Jesus Christ. Herein lies the integration of preaching and ecclesiology. On Tuesday, August 21, 2012 Dr. William Lyle stated that John Wesley used preaching for people to experience a great awakening to God. Outler further emphasizes that Wesley's field preaching's were designed to warm the people's heart for God.¹⁷³ The apostle Paul preached for one to place faith in Jesus Christ. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things (Rom 10:13-15). Faith in Christ, and therefore Christian experience, is essentially ecclesial.¹⁷⁴

Preaching is also rendered *kerusso*. *Kerusso* (κηρύσσω) means to announce publicly or declare a public event or particular assignment. In addition, it is to convey a message from a discourse. Soanes and Stevenson define preaching as delivering a religious address to an assembled group of people.¹⁷⁵ Larue asserts that there are four essentials to preaching in the African American context. He argues that the preaching

¹⁷²Arndt, Danker, & Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 402.

¹⁷³Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 41-42.

¹⁷⁴Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, & Colin Crowder, *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 146.

¹⁷⁵Soanes & Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Preaching."

must include God, Scripture, the preacher, and the Black lived experience.¹⁷⁶ James Ray says, “Preaching is the Word of God if, and only if, it preaches the Word of God, that is, the scriptures as witnesses to the will and way of God.”¹⁷⁷

Long extrapolates on Ray’s theological motif about preaching. Long vehemently communicates that faithful preaching consists of sensitivity to human need, a discerning eye for the connections between faith and life, an ear attuned to hearing the voice of scripture, compassion, a growing personal faith, and the courage to tell the truth.¹⁷⁸ J. Randall Nichols also contends that preaching, “deliberately sets out to touch and involve people’s personal concerns.”¹⁷⁹ Joseph Sittler said, “Preaching is not merely something a preacher does; it is a function of a preacher’s whole existence concentrated at the point of declaration and interpretation.”¹⁸⁰ Samuel Proctor declares that a sermon must be a “sensitive awareness of the audience and its contextual situation,” knowledgeable of a congregation’s theological construct and biblical comprehension, and a relevant word.¹⁸¹

Robert Rayburn instructed his seminary students to take the task of preparing to preach very seriously. His fundamental philosophy was, “Christ is the only King of your studies, but homiletics is the queen.”¹⁸² In a lecture on September 2001, Myles Jones

¹⁷⁶LaRue, *I Believe I’ll Testify*, 58.

¹⁷⁷James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007), 18.

¹⁷⁸Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 49-50.

¹⁷⁹J. Randall Nichols, *The Restoring Word: Preaching as Pastoral Communication* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1987), 16.

¹⁸⁰Joseph Sittler, *The Anguish of Preaching* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 7-8.

¹⁸¹Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1994), 22-25.

¹⁸²Bryan Chapel, *Christ Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 26.

argues that the sermon is not fulfilled until it has accomplished its behavioral purpose. Chapel's theory of preaching is harmonious to Jones.' He supports the notion that preaching accomplishes its spiritual purpose not because of the skills or the wisdom of a preacher but because of the power of scripture proclaimed.¹⁸³ James Kay raises the question, "Why do the scriptures require preaching." Kay argues that Jesus Christ in the synagogue in Nazareth revealed the primacy of preaching the scriptures by preaching the Isaiah passage and not reading it.¹⁸⁴ Berkhof believes that true preaching of the Word of God is the most important mark of the church.¹⁸⁵

Berkhof's homiletical motif holds very true in the Black church. The sermon has been the theological pillar for the ecclesiastical and discipleship life of the Black church. Black preaching and Black sermons are unique to its context. James Earl Massey asserts that there are five unique characteristics for Black preaching. First, Black preaching is functional which focuses on a means to an end. Second, Black preaching is festive as it deals with concrete life and aims to be an invitation to joy in the midst of sorrow and struggle. Third, Black preaching is communal which challenges its hearers to aid in the sense of group life. Fourth, Black preaching is radical in the pedagogy that it seeks to confront the hearers in the very depths of their beings with the issues of life. Fifthly, Black preaching is climatic. It seeks some type of celebratory close to make an impression on hearers.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴Kay, *Preaching and Theology*, 19.

¹⁸⁵Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 1509.

¹⁸⁶LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify*, 33.

Cleophus LaRue states that it is articulation and argumentation of how the sovereign God is at work in and through the black experience that distinguishes the essence of powerful Black preaching.¹⁸⁷ Dr. Gardner Taylor adds that it is the experience of African Americans having one foot out of the larger culture that gives the unique angle of vision to the Black preacher.¹⁸⁸ Bishop Joseph Johnson of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church said, “Black preaching is by its nature a story-telling process; and Black preachers have mastered the art of breathing life into both the story and the truth that it teaches. He uses his imagination creatively and he places himself as an eyewitness to the story which he narrates and has mastered the art of role playing.”¹⁸⁹

Henry Mitchell added two hermeneutical principles that shape the style and content of Black preaching. First, the sermon must be preached in the language and culture of the hearers. Second, there is an imperative for the gospel message to speak to the needs or life situation of the listeners.¹⁹⁰ LaRue affixes strong biblical content, creative uses of language, appeal to emotions, ministerial authority, and an emotive/celebrative encounter between the preacher and the pew.¹⁹¹ Thomas Hoyt, Jr. rationalizes that since the Black church was born in slavery, its distinctiveness is connected to the context of marginalization and struggle. He says, “It is the interaction of a marginalized Black experience and biblical interpretation that enables Blacks to

¹⁸⁷Cleophus LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1999), 115.

¹⁸⁸William H. Crouch, & Joel C. Gregory, *What We Love About the Black Church: Can We Get a Witness* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁸⁹Joseph Johnson Jr., *Proclamation Theology* (Shreveport, LA: Fourth Episcopal District Press, 1977), 48.

¹⁹⁰Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 29.

¹⁹¹LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, 9-13.

confront biblical texts in a compelling and creative manner.”¹⁹² Proctor derived five theological themes that shaped Black preaching:

1. God is still present and active in human affairs and intervenes on our behalf.
2. Spiritual renewal and moral wholeness are available to us all.
3. Genuine community is a realizable goal for the human family.
4. Eternity moves through time, and immortality is an ever-present potential.
5. We have already passed from death unto life when we love.¹⁹³

These unique characteristics are several reasons that the sermon in the Black Church has been the staple and anchor of shaping one’s faith. The sermon has spoken to core areas of Black life and responsibilities. Carlyle Stewart asserts the sermon must evidence a concern for life in the larger community and demonstrate the pastor’s capacity for critical inquiry.¹⁹⁴ Stewart’s beliefs further emphasize and catalyze credence to Craddock’s motif that preaching is the appropriation of the authorial intent of the text in contemporary terms for a particular congregation.¹⁹⁵ Long avows that the pastoral aim of the sermon is to speak to the heart and concerns of the hearers to provoke change.¹⁹⁶ Since the sermon has been and is the cornerstone of the spiritual and faith development of disciples, why do we limit its impact and engagement to the weekend experience?

¹⁹²Thomas Hoyt Jr., “Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition,” in *Stony the Road We Trod*, editor Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 27.

¹⁹³Samuel D. Proctor, *How Shall They Hear?* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1992), 10.

¹⁹⁴Carlyle F Stewart II, *African American Church Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 102.

¹⁹⁵Samuel K. Roberts, *Born to Preach* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2009), 9.

¹⁹⁶Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 29.

Stewart believes that the sermon should educate as well as encourage the pursuit of deeper insight and spiritual transformation.¹⁹⁷

Digging deeper into the word of God for scriptural insight and spiritual formation is at the core of discipleship. Discipleship (*akoloutheō*) in its broader perspective is following after Jesus.¹⁹⁸ Discipleship originates from the word disciple. According to Geddert, a disciple is one who has taken up a position behind Jesus. Thus, specifically, discipleship is moving a disciple into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Hunt and Mays emphasize that the static process of discipleship is depicted through the lens of growing, improving, reaching, and stretching.¹⁹⁹ Bill Hybels coined the discipleship process in five stages, also known as the “G” model. The commencement of the discipleship process is grace, which was the term of one’s salvation. Secondly, a disciple experiences growth in one’s relationship with Jesus Christ. The third stage is the small group life of the believer with other Christian believers. Next, the disciple uses one’s spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Fifthly, the disciple embodies the tenets of being a good steward through the giving of time, talents, and resources.²⁰⁰

Martin Luther believed that church as a whole had a responsibility in the discipleship process. Luther lobbied for the priesthood of every believer, which meant

¹⁹⁷Stewart II, *African American Church Growth*, 102-103.

¹⁹⁸T. J. Geddert, *Mark. Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 205.

¹⁹⁹Josh Hunt, and Larry Mays, *Disciple Making Teachers* (Loveland CO: Vital Ministry Books, 1998), 13.

²⁰⁰Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 199-200.

that every believer had a spiritual obligation to each other.²⁰¹ The church has a spiritual responsibility for the growth and development of its disciples. Furthermore, Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). The Apostle Paul also stressed the importance of discipleship to the early church by using the word *manthano* eighteen times. *Manthano* in the Greek means, to learn or the development process of a disciple.²⁰²

Moreover, the apostle Paul clarifies that the pastor/teacher bears the chief responsibility of discipleship in the church. Paul states that the goal of discipleship is to bring the individual to full maturity in Jesus Christ. “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13). J. Alfred Smith states that in the Black church tradition, the pastor is viewed as the resident chef who feeds the membership with food for the soul.²⁰³ James Evans asserts that most Black theologizing takes place in the pulpit.²⁰⁴ Hull agrees with Paul that discipleship is not static but is constantly maturing the individual until the consummation of life.²⁰⁵ Hull

²⁰¹Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 9-13.

²⁰²Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 18.

²⁰³Alfred J. Smith, *Preach On* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 49.

²⁰⁴Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, 50.

²⁰⁵Hull, *The Disciple-Making Church*, 21.

further elaborates that discipleship is composed of intentional training with accountability on the basis of loving relationships.

Hull's definition and description underscores the core components of sermon-based small groups. The early church was an exemplary display of these core components being lived out in its faith formation. This model was critical in Hybel's theological framework that the small group life was critical for the growth and maturation of the disciple. George Barna, in his research on effective Christian discipleship, derived that discipleship must be a lifelong, passionate process that is done in community rather than isolation with the goal of building depth while maturing the believer.²⁰⁶ Hence, John Wesley was an advocate that class meetings, small groups, were the most effective means of discipleship as it provided a microcosm of community for faith formation to occur. For this reason, Wesley would not leave an area in which he preached without establishing small groups for these new converts to grow spiritually.²⁰⁷ Essentially, small groups were the focal point of discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition.

Wesley also subscribed that the sermon should be the pedagogy that governed the group life of disciples. Wesley's sermons were written for the common people to read or to hear read in the Methodist societies.²⁰⁸ Wesley's concern and conviction was anchored in the believers building depth in their faith and not becoming puffed up with surface information. Sermon-based small groups were the instruments by which preaching and doctrine were harnessed into spiritual renewal.²⁰⁹ Therefore, Wesley incorporated what

²⁰⁶George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 108-110.

²⁰⁷Paul W. Chilcote, *The Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 113.

²⁰⁸Outler, *John Wesley*, 120.

²⁰⁹Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 31.

had been taught in the society meetings (sermon) into the life of the class meetings/small groups.²¹⁰ Larry Osborne agrees with Wesley that sermon-based small groups offer a synergistic spiritual diet that aids in the discipleship process. Sermon-based small groups “put’s everyone on the same page and make them look at that page more than once.”²¹¹ Philip Jacob Spener vies that listening, reading, meditating, and discussing the sermons are central to spiritual formation.²¹² The small groups are accredited with being the major pillar for spiritual formation historically.²¹³

Matthaei asserts, in order for faith formation to occur in the life of the disciples, the church must offer preaching and witnessing of the good news of God’s grace, ongoing instruction and nurture in the faith, pastoral care to support persons on their journey of faith, opportunities for service on behalf of our neighbors, and fellowship with other Christians on the journey.²¹⁴ These core areas are all encompassed in sermon-based small groups. Sermon-based small groups are formed and fashioned around the preaching and witness of the Word of God in which disciples will dig deeper into guided instruction. The facilitators or leaders share the pastoral care of responsibility and encourage each participant to care for one another. The small groups have weekly fellowships and are required to serve the community in which the group is held. Osborne contends that sermon-based small groups proved to be pivotal in the faith formation of disciples at the North Coast Church. Osborne stated, “The ultimate goal of a sermon-

²¹⁰Ibid., 107.

²¹¹Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 61.

²¹²Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1964), 91.

²¹³ Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1995), 127.

²¹⁴Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 34.

based small group is to velcro people to the two things they will need most when faced with a need-to-know or need-to-grow situation: the Bible and other Christians.”²¹⁵

Samuel DeWitt Proctor raised the issue of sermon comprehension and clarity. Proctor argued that one of the theological goals of the sermon is to achieve understanding. Proctor said, “An awful lot of preaching goes on, but is a lot of reaching going on?” biblical understanding is essential to the growth and development of a disciple in his/her faith formation. James Harris recalled some of the historical statements made during the sermon in the Black church appealing for clarity. Statements such as “Make it plain preacher,” or “Make it clear” are commonly uttered from the pews. Harris argues that everything about the sermon discourse is grounded in interpretation, and interpretation is grounded in understanding.²¹⁶ The Gospel of Mark chapter 4 revealed that there are moments in which disciples need clarity on the sermon. For Katie Cannon, preaching gives birth to questions.²¹⁷

Sermon-based small groups offer a platform for questions to be asked and answered. It provides a systematic structure for disciples to be held accountable and monitor their maturation in the discipleship process. Making disciples is the chief responsibility of the church as commanded by Jesus Christ. Since George Barna contends that discipleship occurs in community, the sermon-based small groups will provide the community for discipleship to occur while utilizing the historical pillar of the Black church, the sermon, to be further studied to carry out the spirit of its message.

²¹⁵Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 42.

²¹⁶James H. Harris, *The Word Made Plain* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 51.

²¹⁷Katie G. Cannon, *Teaching Preaching* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 32.

Sermon-based small groups have been impactful in developing and strengthening disciples for centuries. However, this model has not been integrated or implemented into the Black church as its sole pedagogy for discipleship. This project seeks to demonstrate how the unique attributes of Black preaching will offer colossal benefits and usher in a paradigm shift in the spiritual formation of the Black church. The Black church will experience a similar transformation, as did the historical church that “preaching and participation in small groups provides the basic means for growth in faith.”²¹⁸

²¹⁸Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 28.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this project proposes that if sermon based small groups is the pedagogical tool to address discipleship, then it will impact alienation and the church will grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation. The hypothesis is based on my personal small group experiences in other contexts, literature reviewed, and discussions with other pastors utilizing these groups as their sole pedagogy of discipleship. These experiences assisted in determining, processing, and understanding the challenges within the context, as well as the need to heal and address the issues of a sense of loss of family, culture, and spiritual identity.

Intervention

The context of this ministry project was The Fountain of New Life Church in Miami Gardens, Florida. The Fountain of New Life is a church, which transitioned from a suburban context to an urban context while simultaneously merging with another local congregation. The transition created a void and sense of loss for both local congregations as several families and a good delegation of constituents did not make the transition. In addition to the transition, the merger generated a spiritual identity crisis. One congregation came from a non-denominational faith background juxtapose to the other congregation having a Pentecostal faith heritage. This non-polar merger of churches

generated a colossal void for both ministries, theologically, spiritually, historically, and in some aspects apologetically. The first year after the merger and transition was spent trying to build ministry and implement creative cultural and ministry modalities. During the yearly assessment with the ministry team, stewardship, and attendance decreased, there was low morale, and apathetic attitudes and behaviors toward the progression of the ministry.

Meetings were held with the congregation to share the state of the ministry and to discuss ministry plans for the upcoming year. It was at this meeting that it became clear that many people in the congregation were hurt, grieving, felt a sense of loss, alienation, and simply did not know the spiritual identity of the church. It became evident that healing needed to occur if this congregation was going to rebuild and move forward.

One of the major barriers, or challenges, to rebuilding and restoring hope in a congregation which experienced a sense of loss of family, culture, and spiritual identity, is many congregants internalize their pain, hurt, and loss. This happens due to many congregants losing trust and confidence in the leadership as many placed blame and accountability on the leadership for their sense of loss and alienation. A great deal of compassion, empathy, patience, sharing, supporting, and commitment to biblical preaching and teaching will be needed to begin the rebuilding and healing process to bring the church close together and provide a sense of family and spiritual identity.

Research Design

The best method to conduct this research was a phenomenological study using a qualitative research design. This qualitative design was determined to be the most effective means “for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups

ascribe to a social or human problem.”¹ The goal was to engage a focus group to obtain transparent and honest feedback as it pertained to their feelings of the church’s spiritual identity, culture, and their relationship barometer within the congregation. Moreover, there was a desired to see if there was action assignments that could be explored and engaged to alleviate the alienation, redefine spiritual identity and create a new culture while building accountable relationships. Krueger and Casey state in *Focus Groups* that a focus group “encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote or reach a consensus.”² Therefore, in concert with Krueger and Casey, a focus group was chosen for this research methodology, as it would provide “a way to better understand how people feel about an issue.”³ Upon completion of a series of sermons, sermon-group homework assignments, reflective journals, in-depth interviewing, and evaluation surveys with the focus group, it was envisioned, the participants would be able to provide some measurable data, as it related to the project hypothesis.

Small groups were utilized as a part of the research design because it was believed to provide the best opportunity and safe environment for some of the member of the congregation to have in-depth sermon study, share their concerns and questions while having a support system. These small groups provided the platform for the sermon to be studied microscopically through a guided homework aimed at faith formation and spiritual identity. In addition, it is in this setting congregants can connect with other

¹John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014), 3.

²Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000),

³*Ibid.*

congregants, share and express their feelings, ask questions, support and serve each other as well as engage the facilitator in conversation.

The focus group consisted of congregants from both existing congregations prior to the church merger who stayed through the transition as well as congregants who united with the church after the merger. There were nineteen participants in the group with each gender and age groups represented starting at age eighteen. The focus group was comprised of both leaders and laity.

Four sermons were developed and preached followed by four small group settings in the same week. The criterion for the four small groups: (1) sermon-based guided homework; (2) address the personal, emotional, and spiritual issues the congregation were dealing with; and (3) include practical applications in their faith formation. After each small group session, participants prayed for and with each other followed by a period of brief fellowship. The fellowship period included food that was prepared by the participants in the focus group.

The purpose of this ministry model was to provide a discipleship model that impacts the culture and climate of this church by addressing the sense of loss members experienced during the transition. It also served as an opportunity to explore the feelings and reservations congregants had toward the church since its transition. Moreover, it would ignite the process of renewed spiritual identity, ownership, and a sense of family. The ultimate goal of this project was to describe the process and experience of developing *Sermon Based Disciples*, which will impact alienation and foster an environment and culture for the church to grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation.

Measurement

The data gathered concerning the importance of study Scripture, more specifically an in-depth investigation of the sermon and a discipleship model that shares, support, and serve others in the church family, was organized through comparative methods. These parameters of the focus groups were tested twice using a pre and post survey, once prior to the sermon based small groups and at the conclusion of the sermon based small groups. The context and professional associates electronically tested the pre and post surveys in order to collect unbiased data. The participants were encouraged to journal any reflections throughout the four week small group sessions and how it impacted them in their faith formation. Also, a random sampling of the focus group was selected to participate in an in-depth interview by the researcher. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed them. The pastor was also interviewed for his assessment of sermon based small groups.

Instrumentation

A focus group met at The Fountain of New Life Church for four sessions over a period of four weeks for ninety minutes. A pre-survey was administered at the commencement of the study. Four sermons were preached on Sundays and the homework was emailed to each participant after each sermon. At each sermon based small group gathering, the researcher facilitated the in-depth study of the sermon and time of sharing and supporting. Each session ended in a period of praying for one another and time of fellowship. Time was also allotted for participants to write reflective journals of their experience to generate data, which could help determine if the small groups were

impactful. The format and homework of the sermon based small groups are included in the appendix.

The population was purposefully chose as they were a representation of the total composition of the congregation ranging in age, gender, length of church membership, and individuals from both congregations prior to the church merger, as well as new disciples to the church. Members of the focus group were intentionally engaged in a personal, yet professional way in order to build a better relationship with them. It was felt that if the members of the group developed a closer relationship with the facilitator, they would be more willing to open up about what they had to share. Larry Osborne in *Sticky Church* states, “small groups naturally foster greater honesty and transparency.”⁴ John Wesley described the small groups as “a company of men having the form of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”⁵ D. Michael Henderson asserts small groups were the hubs for making disciples by “providing a matrix personal growth within the context of an intimate fellowship, accountability for spiritual stewardship, bearing one another’s burdens, and speaking the truth in love.”⁶

After four consecutive weeks of sermon based small group gatherings, a post-survey was given to the members of the focus group. The questions pertained to the role of sermon, studying and sharing with others, as well as supporting and serving one another in spiritual growth and faith formation. A copy of the survey is located in

⁴Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 53.

⁵Robert W. Burtner, & Robert E. Chiles, *John Wesley’s Theology: A Collection From His Works* (Nashville, TN: Parthenon Press, 1954), 258.

⁶Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 118-119.

Appendix B. The context and professional associates collected the surveys. Quantitative tools were utilized for data analysis through Survey Monkey, after which, the context and professional associates met with the researcher to examine the results.

PROJECT TIMELINE

APRIL

12th: Finalize Context Associates membership

16th: Project Timeline Due

18th: Finalize Professional Associates membership

- Submit Candidacy Review documents to the one who will accompany student

19th: Project Timeline Proposal Due (250 words)

- Submit applicable documents to Candidacy Review attendees

19th: Submit all Candidacy Review documents to Faculty Mentors

21st – 24th: Peer Session in Tampa, FL

27th: Meet with Professional Associates to discuss research project

- Cover expectations as determined by UTS Handbook

29th: Meet with Context Associates to discuss research project

- Cover expectations as determined by UTS Handbook

30th: Submit all Candidacy Review documents to Faculty Mentors

MAY

6th: Meet with Context Associates

- Discuss parameters of research project
- Create proposed schedule/budget

7th: Meet with Professional Associates

- Discuss parameters of research project
- Garner feedback on proposed schedule/budget

13th: Meet with Context Associates

- Revamp budget/schedule as necessary
- Discuss metrics needed for research

14th: Meet with Professional Associates

- Garner feedback on metrics
- Review Candidacy Review documents

20th: Meet with Context Associates

- Devise metrics needed for research
- Devise implementation plan
- Finalize schedule/budget

21th: Meet with Professional Associates

- Garner feedback on implementation strategy

28th: Meet with Focus Group for Pre-Survey

JUNE

3rd: Pre and Post Survey Proposed Questions

10th: Pre and Post Survey Revised Questions

17th: Pre and Post Survey Finalized Questions

24th: Pre and Post Survey Questions Entered into Survey Tool

JULY

24th: Meet with Professional Associates

- Prep Professional Associate for Candidacy Review

AUGUST

5th: Final prep with Professional Associate accompanying student to Candidacy Review

19th – 23rd: Intensive Week at UTS

- Candidacy Review

SEPTEMBER

2nd: Pre-Survey

8th: Preach Sermon 1

9th: Small Group Session 1

15th: Preach Sermon 2

16th: Small Group Session 2

22nd: Preach Sermon 3

23rd: Small Group Session 3

29th: Preach Sermon 4

30th: Small Group Session 4 and Post Survey

Legend: Meet w/CAs; Meet w/ PAs; Holidays; Peer Session/Intensive

April 2013

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12 CA	13
14	15	16 Project Timeline	17	18 PAs	19 Abstract	20
21 Peer	22 Group	23 In	24 Tampa	25	26	27 PAs
28	29 CAs	30				

Legend: Meet w/CAs; Meet w/ PAs; Holidays; Peer Session/Intensive

May 2013

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6 CAs	7 PAs	8	9	10	11
12	13 CAs	14 PAs	15	16	17	18
19	20 CAs	21 PAs	22	23	24	25

26	27 Memori al Day	28	29	30	31
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June 2013

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19 Peer Group	20 Peer Group	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

Legend: Meet w/CAs; Meet w/ PAs; Holidays; Peer Session/Intensive

July 2013

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4 Independence Day	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20

21	22	23	24 PAs	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

August 2013

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
4	5 PAs	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20 Candidacy Review	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

Legend: Meet w/CAs; Meet w/ PAs; Holidays; Peer Session/Intensive

September 2013

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1 Pre-Survey	2 Labor Day	3	4	5	6	7
8 Sermon One	9 Small Group One	10	11	12 Peer Session Baltimore	13 Peer Session Baltimore	14

15 Sermon Two	16 Small Group Two	17	18	19	20	21
22 Sermon Three	23 Small Group Three	24	25	26	27	28
29 Sermon Four	30 Small Group Four					

CHAPTER FIVE

FIELD EXPERIENCE

Designing the Research Project

This chapter provides an assessment of the objectives of the project, collection of data, analysis of data, and the resulting outcomes. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the focus group and describe any adjustments, which occurred in the process. Upon completion of this chapter, the reader should have a thorough view of what took place during the implementation of the project model and the results.

Project's Problem

The Fountain of Pembroke Pines and Miami's New Life International Church decided to merger congregations and become The Fountain of New Life Church. This non-polar merger of churches generated a colossal void for both ministries, theologically, spiritually, historically, and in some aspects apologetically. Decreased stewardship and attendance, low morale, and apathetic attitudes and behaviors toward the progression of the ministry was observed. It became clear that many people in the congregation were hurt, grieving, felt a sense of loss, alienation, and simply did not know the spiritual identity of the church.

Project Hypothesis

The non-directional hypothesis is that if sermon based small groups is the pedagogical tool to address discipleship, then it will impact alienation and the church will grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation.

Project Purpose

The primary purpose of this project has been to describe the impact of sermon-based groups (disciples) has on the culture and climate of a church that is experiencing a sense of loss of family and culture as well as a spiritual identity crisis. The expectation was that this model would impact alienation and the church would grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation.

Project Objective

The ministry project team established the following objectives for this project:

- A. To educate and model to the focus group sermon-based small groups.
- B. To provide a system of accountability and fellowship.
- C. Give the participants of the focus group a forum, which will allow them to openly express what they experienced, as well as how they were affected.
- D. Give the participants of the focus group a platform to engage the sermon in more depth and ask questions of clarity.

Focus Group Overview

The ministry project team conducted a focus group at The Fountain of New Life Church in Miami Gardens, Florida. The focus group consisted of active members from both existing congregations prior to the church merger who stayed through the transition as well as members who united with the church after the merger. There were nineteen

participants in the group with each gender and age groups represented starting at age eighteen. The focus group was comprised of both leaders and laity.

The pedagogical component of the focus group consisted of four small group sessions. The criterion for the four small groups: (1) sermon-based guided homework; (2) address the personal, emotional, and spiritual issues the congregation were dealing with; and (3) include practical applications in their faith formation. The sessions lasted for ninety minutes, which included fifteen minutes of fellowship and fifteen minutes of prayer, praise, and reflection. The fellowship period included food that was prepared by the participants in the focus group. These small groups provided the platform for the sermon to be studied microscopically through a guided homework aimed at faith formation and spiritual identity. In addition, it is in this setting congregants can connect with other congregants, share and express their feelings, ask questions, support and serve each other as well as engage the facilitator in conversation. Participants were asked to write a journal reflection after each session about their feelings or experiences.

Sermon Based Small Group Sessions Overview

Below is an overview of the four sermon based small groups given during the focus group sessions. Copies of the guided homework and small group format can be found in Appendix C. An in-depth overview of the four-week focus group sessions can be found in Appendix H.

1. Small Group Session One: Sound the Alarm: Predator—The sermon was preached and emailed to small group participants on Sunday along with the sermon homework guide. This session provided the participants a clear understanding on how to sound the alarm about our common enemy, the devil, and his strategies to negatively

impact and destroy our lives as believers. The session opened with prayer and blessing of the food. Participants were then thanked for his or her participation. A brief synopsis of the project was provided, at which point, the participants were presented with a small group covenant agreement to guide their four-week session. Copies of small group covenant can be found in Appendix D. Once all the preliminaries were established, the session began using the sermon homework guide. It also allowed participants to share their struggles and battles with spiritual warfare and pray for one another.

2. Small Group Session Two: Sound the Alarm: Terminator—The sermon was preached and emailed to small group participants on Sunday along with the sermon homework guide. This session revealed that there are giants in our lives that have reached their extinction date and need to be terminated before they caused further damage and destruction in our families, our faith, and our futures. Practical principles were shared on how to become the Terminator to the giants in our lives. Participants were allowed to encourage and pray for each other to face their giants as well as journal about their experience.

3. Small Group Session Three: Sound the Alarm: Lethal Weapon—The sermon was preached and emailed to small group participants on Sunday along with the sermon homework guide. This session provided biblical explanation our spiritual weapons and how we are to use them in warfare. It also challenged the participants not to fight each other but exposed the structure of our spiritual enemy. In addition, the participants were challenged to have accountability partners in their faith formation as well as journal about their experience.

4. Small Group Session Four: Sound the Alarm: Die Hard—The sermon was preached and emailed to small group participants on Sunday along with the sermon homework guide. This session focused on us living life to the fullest and giving it all that we have to offer. We examined the spiritual model Paul exemplified in 2 Timothy 4:6-11. This session challenged the participants to think about their future, legacy, and relationship with others.

The participants were thanked for the participation in the four-week focus group. The workshop concluded with prayer, and the participants were encouraged to live with their legacy in mind. The participants were reminded to journal their experience and to complete the post survey that would be emailed to them within twenty-four hours. Hard copies of the survey were available for those who preferred to complete it manually. Fellowship over food occurred for about fifteen minutes.

Collection of Data

It was determined that the best method was a phenomenological study using a qualitative research design. This qualitative design was determined to be the most effective means “for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.”¹ The goal was to engage a focus group to obtain transparent and honest feedback as it pertained to their feelings of the church’s spiritual identity, culture, and their relationship barometer within the congregation. Moreover, it was desired to see if there was action assignments that could be explored and engaged to alleviate the alienation, redefine spiritual identity and create a new culture while building accountable relationships.

¹Creswell, Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods, 3.

A pre-survey, which included demographical information, was electronically submitted to the participants to complete. A post survey was administered in similar fashion immediately after the last session of the focus group. Copies of the aforementioned surveys can be found in Appendix A. Analyzing and comparing the information obtained from these surveys measured the effectiveness and impact of the project model. Quantitative tools were utilized for data analysis through Survey Monkey.

In addition to the pre and post survey, the journal reflections from participants throughout the four-week small group sessions on how the sessions impacted them in their faith formation were collected. Also, a random sampling of the focus group was selected to participate in an in-depth interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The pastor was also interviewed for his assessment of sermon based small groups. Copies of the interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Participants

Nineteen members of the congregation were purposefully selected and met with the ministry project team to discuss the details and expectations of the focus group. At this meeting, a brief overview of the ministry project as well explained the purpose, scope and expectations of the focus group was provided. After a few preliminary questions, the nineteen individuals confirmed their willingness to participate. Of the nineteen participants, six were males and thirteen were females ranging between the ages of twenty to sixty-nine, which is a true reflection of the gender ratio in the church. See Appendix E for more in-depth demographics information.

Results of the Model

The data was calculated using the analysis tools provided by Survey Monkey. The ministry project team reviewed and analyzed the data from the pre and post surveys, journal reflections, and in-depth interviews. The results and analysis are shown below.

Major Finding One

The organizing of the sermon based small groups did provide a platform for participants to engage the sermon in more depth and ask questions of clarity.

The first data exemplar were the results from the pre and post survey question 1, which revealed a 5.2 percent increase in studying the sermon more in depth. Also, the post survey demonstrated a 33 percent decrease of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed that the sermon played a major role in their faith formation.

Statement 1 - It is important to study the sermon more in depth after hearing it.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	5.3%	0%
3 Agree	42.1%	36.8%
4 Strongly Agree	47.4%	57.9%
Rating Average	3.32	3.47

The participants commitment to meditate upon the sermon and other scriptures microscopically for faith formation was extremely important juxtapose to a sense of loss of spiritual identity that many parishioners expressed during the church merger and transition. The cause for the shift in importance is attributed to the focus groups sessions digging deeper into the sermon each week and providing an opportunity to ask questions

of clarity and learning from other's interpretation of the sermon. The data suggests that the more participants have a platform to engage the sermon after hearing it, the more the participants will meditate upon the sermon and other scriptures.

Preaching exegetical sermons and creating a homework guide cultivated a meditative modality. Thought provocative questions were also ask during the session, which further encouraged participants to dig deeper. Many of the participants would start referencing segments of the sermon during these discussions. The sermon referencing would cause other participants to state their intentions and desire to listen to the sermon again more attentively. The sermon became more instrumental in their faith formation as the data suggested.

Another data exemplar that supported this finding emerged from the journal reflections was the theme of meditation. The reflections revealed how the small groups provided a platform that encouraged in-depth sermon study as well as how to apply these faith principles into one's life. Several of the comments were as follows:

1. Well I was given a spiritual eye opener to what the meaning of spiritual warfare means after asking questions and going deeper into the sermon.
2. I hope to still be able to learn from your sermons in the near future.
3. The Sound the Alarm focus small group afforded me the opportunity to take my understanding of spiritual warfare to another level. The teaching, digging into God's word, sharing in group and life application catapulted my knowledge base and my awareness of spiritual warfare.
4. I learned so much about spiritual warfare and really made me pay closer attention to the sermon.
5. The most amazing part was the weekly application challenge in how to apply the sermon to my life.
6. Well I was given a spiritual eye opener to what the meaning of spiritual warfare means after asking questions and going deeper into the sermon.

7. I hope to still be able to learn from your sermons in the near future.
8. The Sound the Alarm focus small group afforded me the opportunity to take my understanding of spiritual warfare to another level. The teaching, digging into God's word, sharing in group and life application catapulted my knowledge base and my awareness of spiritual warfare.
9. I learned so much about spiritual warfare and really made me pay closer attention to the sermon.
10. The most amazing part was the weekly application challenge in how to apply the sermon to my life.

A third data exemplar that supports my major finding emerged during the in-depth interviews. Participants were asked how did they interact with the sermon post the focus group experience. The responses were in concert with the post-survey and journal reflections as many indicated the importance of studying the sermon after hearing it.

1. I dig deeper into the sermon now. I pay more attention to what the message is and how to use the Scripture for me. I have always listened to the message but I did not personalize the sermon. Now, I looked for the relevance for my spiritual life.
2. I used to approach the sermon from a feel good or emotional perspective. Now, I look forward to the sermon causing me to think. As the sermon is being preached, I am very engaged and trying to forecast it. Later, I go and study it in depth. I look up words and other scripture references. I now find myself listening to sermons more than once.
3. I tend to dive in more after hearing the sermon. I read the chapters before and after the passage from which the sermon was preached. It allows me to go deeper. I like to know the reason behind the sermon. I have been able to better understand the context of the passage put myself in the place of what was occurring in the bible. I also cross reference other passages in the bible and see how they relate to the passage.
4. I understand a lot more since the group. It was good to learn more and how to study the word more. I am reading the bible more on my own and not just at church. Going in depth in the sermon allowed me to learn more. Studying it allowed the word to speak more personally to me. As I listen to sermon more, my eyes are open spiritually. I engage the sermon more and think more about.
5. I used to listen and take notes but this experience gave me a vivid picture of what happened. It stimulated me to study more. I now used soniclight.com as a web resource to dig deeper into a particular scripture. I also look at historical

criticism. I study more microscopically and with more intentionality. I used to study general but now it is more specific.

6. Personally, on my own I do not interact with the sermon differently. I need the small group to help keep me focused and committed to the sermon.

This platform seemed to provide participants with different learning styles the ability to engage the sermon and other scriptures independently as well as learn and share interdependently. In addition, the platform created a space for participants to share their insight gained from their meditative moments as well as an opportunity to ask questions of clarity. The opportunity to ask questions was an overall benefit as participants were able to overcome the myth of asking unintelligent questions. The participants fully engaged this platform and became more meditative in the process. Therefore, as the data suggests, the organizing of the sermon based small groups did provide a platform for participants to engage the sermon in more depth and ask questions of clarity. The high emphasis on studying the sermon microscopically appeared to facilitate a culture change and helped with the sense of loss that the church as these participants placed more spiritual emphasis in their faith formation and spiritual identity.

Major Finding Two

The sermon based small group did provide a system of accountability and fellowship.

The data revealed the spiritual and emotional barometer of the group dynamics in which is described as melodic. The participants seemed to be excited about this four-week small group experience. This melodic language was significant juxtapose to the overwhelming sense of cultural and spiritual loss as well as the alienation that many parishioners had communicated verbally and through a lack of engagement and excitement about the church. The results were first observed in pre and post survey

questions 5 and 6, which addressed the issue of accountability and fellowship. See Appendix F for results.

As it pertained to question 5, the results from the post-survey reflected a 5.2 percent increase in those who strongly agreed that they viewed it as imperative to their spiritual development to have this support from their church family. The weekly accountability reports from the focus groups coupled with participants praying with and for each other further supported their presupposition about having support from their church family. Weekly, participants were paired up for prayer and follow-up during the week to see how each other is doing in applying the principles of the sermon in their lives. Intentionality was used in modeling accountability within the group, as he would often lead off the accountability reports. Vulnerability and transparency were displayed, which helped create an environment for others to share openly and confidentially.

The importance of fellowship was addressed in pre and post surveys question six. The pre and post surveys revealed that 94.7% of the participants viewed fellowship with other Christian believers was important for spiritual growth and discipleship. The data suggests that the fellowship help to create an atmosphere in which people had a positive emotional experience and catalyzed these melodic social connections. These melodic social connections were extremely important as it directly addressed the alienation and lack of engagement and excitement about the church.

Secondly, the impact and assessment of how these melodic social connections were expressed in the participant's journal reflections, which supports my finding. More specifically, the participants shared how important the fellowship and accountability of the sermon based small groups was to their spiritual growth and development.

1. As a new member to the church and community, this small group allowed me to connect with others and provided a sense of family. It was great having people to ask how you are doing and to pray for you.
2. The fellowship was great as well and to support you and others meant a lot to me.
3. The time of fellowship before and after group was refreshing. It reminded me of the way our church used to be. I laughed, talked, and shared and many nights we closed the church while talking in the parking lot. It was great to meet and share with people who were going through similar situations.
4. It was great to put names with some faces that I had seen for years. I love my church even more now.” “I heard from other believers and hopefully helped them with my insight and made me want to sharpen my skills. The fellowship was great as well and to support you and others meant a lot to me.
5. It was great hearing from everyone and personally feeling connected.
6. Through our sharing it was loud and clear that we need a circle of like-minded people to keep us grounded.
7. In all of my church experiences, I never felt like whether I studied the Bible mattered. I knew that if I didn’t study the Bible and do my homework that I would let my group down and not have something to contribute.

Thirdly, this melodic theme was also expressed and echoed throughout the in-depth interviews. When the random sampling of participants was asked about the four-week experience, many of them shared their feelings about the impact that the fellowship and accountability had on their journey. One participant stated, “The small group participants made me feel like I was not alone in my faith walk.” Another participant stated, “I now value connecting with others. The sharing of their testimonies and faith lessons encouraged me greatly.” A third participant stated, “The people in the group were new and some was older but the experience created openness that is still current today. The relationships that started have been crystallized into something greater for the future. I still feel close to the participants from the group. I talk to Brian or Ericka Turk-Moore like and it is like we have never missed a beat. We even share sermon notes now.”

Another participant shared, “I have connected with a group of people who hold me accountable as I learned to appreciate learning and living in community.” A sixth participant stated, “The people were very willing to help others and that was a great experience to have. It was good to have the group there to help me stay focused and accountable.”

The participant’s expressions and assessment of the fellowship and accountability they experienced in the sermon based small group supports and validates my finding that it did provide a system of accountability and fellowship. As the data suggest, this system catalyzed spiritual and social renewal through developing these melodic connections with other disciples in their church. The building of these melodic connections was very significant to fostering a change of a church culture of alienation to one of accountability.

Major Finding Three

The magnetism, or close bond, that these participants developed and disclosed was significant because it provided a platform and created an atmosphere for the participants to openly express what they experienced, as well as how they were affected.

The magnetism that was established in the focus group was important juxtapose to a sense of loss that many parishioners felt prior to this focus group. The first data exemplar that supports this major finding was the results from pre and post survey question 2.

Statement 2 - I feel I am held accountable for my spiritual growth and development.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	5.3%	5.3%

3 Agree	26.3%	21.1%
4 Strongly Agree	63.2%	68.4%
Rating Average	3.47	3.53

The authorial intent of this question allowed the participants to explicitly share their feelings about this magnetism. The results from the post-survey reflected a 5.2 percent increase in those who strongly agreed they felt they were held accountable for their spiritual growth and development.

Another data exemplar that supported this finding transpired in the journal reflections. Several participants in their reflections expressed their concept and appreciation of the magnetic attribute of the small groups and how it affected them. The participants talked about a close connection and bonding that occurred over the four-week period as opposed to a sense of loss and alienation prior to the sessions. After the sessions the participants were expressing more confidently they felt held accountable in their spiritual growth and development. For instance, one participant stated in journal reflection, “As a new member to the church and community, this small group allowed me to connect with others and provide a sense of family. It was great having people to ask how you are doing and to pray for you.” Another participant stated, “Through our sharing it was loud and clear that we need a circle of like-minded people to keep us grounded.” A third participant shared, “It was great to meet and share with people who were going through similar situations.”

Moreover, during the in-depth interviews participants also expressed their appreciation for the impact and role of the magnetism they felt during the focus group, which support this finding. Some of their expressions were as follows:

1. The people were very willing to help others and that was a great experience to have. It was a great place of connection. It was good to have the group there to help me stay focused and accountable.
2. I have connected with a group of people who hold me accountable as I learned to appreciate learning and living in community.
3. I had to evaluate myself and see how accountable I was to upholding them in my Christian walk. There were some things that I like or some things that I disliked in the process. I learned about myself through feedback from others.
4. It was an awesome experience. It helped me to grow in my faith. It was exciting to connect with people who were excited to grow stronger in their faith. I now value connecting with others. The sharing of their testimonies and faith lessons encouraged me greatly. The facilitator was instrumental in encouraging and instructing me in my faith.
5. The focus group made me feel like I was not alone in my faith walk.

The magnetism that the participants experienced and expressed directly addressed the goal that this model would impact alienation and the church would grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation. The magnetism or as one participant stated, “the sense of family,” assisted in the openness and transparency of the group. The participants were able to share their hurts, pains, disappointments, fears, joys, testimonies and anxieties to name a few which facilitated the process of participants building supportive relationships that assisted in their spiritual growth and development.

Major Finding Four

The organizing of the sermon based small groups did have a positive impact on the culture and climate of a church as well as their spiritual identity.

The participants also described the small group experience as maturational. The participants disclosed how they grew spiritually and experienced faith formation during the sessions. Their maturation, as disciples, was significant juxtapose to a church who

was experiencing a spiritual identity crisis and in search of an effective discipleship process to address this issue. The first data exemplar was the results from the pre and post survey question 8.

Statement 8 - The sermon has a major role in my faith formation.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	10.5%	5.3%
3 Agree	42.1%	31.5%
4 Strongly Agree	42.1%	57.9%
Rating Average	3.21	3.42

The microscopic engagement of the sermon and scripture coupled with life application questions appeared to result in spiritual growth according to the participant's assessment. The post survey demonstrated a 33 percent decrease of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed that the sermon played a major role in their faith formation. After spending time in the sessions, the post survey revealed that 89.4 percent to be precise, of the group agreed or strongly agreed that the sermon had a major role in their faith formation. Throughout the four-week time period, time was intentionally spent engaging the sermon, asking questions about the sermon, following up with participant's study and interpretation of the homework, and challenging the participants to apply the sermon to their personal lives.

Secondly, the journal reflections further validated the maturation of the participants and how the emphasis on spiritual and faith formation impacted the culture and climate of the church.

1. I feel like I have grown a lot in this short period of time. The most amazing part was the weekly application challenge in how to apply the sermon to my life.
2. I loved studying the Bible with others and hearing their thoughts. I love my church even more now.
3. I never knew that studying the Bible could be so much fun. The time of fellowship before and after group was refreshing. It reminded me of the way our church used to be. I laughed, talked, and shared and many nights we closed the church while talking in the parking lot.
4. I learned so much about spiritual warfare and really made me pay closer attention to the sermon.
5. My experience was indeed a positive one. The sessions provided clarity and enhanced my understanding of the Bible.
6. The Sound the Alarm focus small group afforded me the opportunity to take my understanding of spiritual warfare to another level. The teaching, digging into God's word, sharing in group and life application catapulted my knowledge base and my awareness of spiritual warfare. This was a tremendous life altering opportunity.
7. Well I was given a spiritual eye opener to what the meaning of spiritual warfare means after asking questions and going deeper into the sermon. I am now able to walk my walk with a different path and see obstacles with the mindset to deal with things a little differently.

A third data exemplar emerged from the content of the in-depth interviews, which further support the finding. Several participants disclosed how they matured spiritually during the focus group. Some stated how they engaged the sermon differently now. Others shared how they lived out their faith differently in response to life situations. Throughout the four-week sessions, the participants began to become more comfortable and initiate many of the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fellowship, and evangelism to name a few, which was a visible change in the climate and culture of the church. As participants became more knowledgeable of and confident in their spiritual identity as sermon based disciples, the thermostat and perception of the church changed. More

importantly, when the participants were asked to talk about the effect the focus group experience had on the church, their responses further verified its positive impact on the climate and culture of the church.

1. It drove me to want to grow more in this new faith experience and environment. It provided a place of refreshment and place where I could grow and feel at home.
2. I feel that the experience made the church come closer. People have connected with others and built accountable relationships. The small groups have become the glue of the church.
3. The people in the group were new and some was older but the experience created openness that is still current today. The relationships that started have been crystallized into something greater for the future. I still feel close to the participants from the group. I talk to Brian or Ericka Turk-Moore like and it is like we have missed a beat. We even share sermon notes now. People from the groups still talk and socialize at church and outside of participants have taken their experience back to these ministries and people they are in relationship with at the church.
4. The sermon based small groups brought members closer together. People communicate about the Word more, share testimonies with each other, and listen to sermon multiple times. People are talking to each other before and after church. People started to pray for each other genuinely and have developed friendships through this experience.
5. This experience had a positive experience on the church. It impacted all of the participants as we have shared with each other post the sessions. We often talk about the sermon series and how we have to be on guard when it comes to spiritual warfare. People are now more spiritual aware and have been deeply rooted conversations.
6. The participants were strengthened so the body had to be strengthened overall.

Major Finding Five

The project was effective in educating and modeling to the focus group sermon-based small groups.

The sermon based small group did prove to be the pedagogical tool to address discipleship. The successful education and modeling to the focus group was instrumental

in impacting alienation and creating a discipleship process that allowed the church to grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation. The first data exemplar was the results from the pre and post survey question 10.

Statement 10 – I am very knowledgeable about sermon-based discipleship.

	Pre-Survey	Post Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	31.6%	21.1%
3 Agree	47.4%	47.4%
4 Strongly Agree	15.8%	26.3%
Rating Average	2.74	2.95

When the project first started, 63.2 percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed they were very knowledgeable about sermon-based discipleship. However, upon completion of the four-week sessions, a significant change took place. The post survey demonstrated a decrease from 36.9 percent to 26.4 percent of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed they were very knowledgeable about sermon-based discipleship. After spending time in the sessions, the post survey revealed that 73.7 percent to be precise, of the group agreed or strongly agreed that they were very knowledgeable about sermon-based discipleship.

Another data exemplar that supports the finding is the sentiments that the participants articulated in their journal reflections. Throughout the four-week time period, intentional time was spent educating and modeling sermon-based discipleship and many of the participants shared their thoughts on the experience. One participant stated, “I too

enjoyed learning something new. Through our sharing it was loud and clear that we need a circle of like-minded people to keep us grounded.... Until next week may God Bless"! Another participant stated, "I am glad I attended. It was great hearing from everyone and personally feeling connected. Look forward to connecting more." A third participant stated, "Thank you again Pastor Taylor for your sessions, and just the invitation to be apart of this process. May showers of blessings pour down on you! I hope to still be able to learn from your sermons in the near future." A fourth participant stated, "The Sound the Alarm focus small group afforded me the opportunity to take my understanding of spiritual warfare to another level. Thank you, Pastor Taylor for the opportunity to learn and grow. This was a tremendous life altering opportunity." A fifth participant stated, "My experience was indeed a positive one. The sessions provided clarity and enhanced my understanding of the Bible. Although there were varying views it solidified my beliefs and my desire to learn more." A sixth participant stated, "I loved studying the Bible with others and hearing their thoughts. It was great to put names with some faces that I had seen for years. I love my church even more now."

A third data exemplar that supports my major finding emerged during the in-depth interviews. Several of the participants coined the sermon based small group experience as "educational, enlightening or awesome" when they were asked to talk about the four-week focus group. They also commented on my role in processing, leading and modeling the faith formation of the sermon based small group.

1. The focus group was rather 'enlightening'. We are grateful for the facilitator's impact and the role in the process.
2. It was an awesome and enlightening experience, which led me to start my own small group.

3. It was an awesome experience. It helped me to grow in my faith. The facilitator was instrumental in encouraging and instructing me in my faith.
4. Overall, it was quite fantastic. It was great to study with people serious about their Christianity.
5. It was a great experience. I made time to study. It offered me the opportunity to go deeper in my study, which has always been my desire. The group experience was different than bible study because it allowed me to glean from others, which helped my faith.
6. It was an educational experience for me. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience as it helped my spiritual walk. I was taught so much by the facilitator. I learned so much under your leadership in the short. I am really appreciative of the experience.

As several participants stated, my role was instrumental in the sermon based disciples process. From the genesis of the focus group, participants were made aware of the imprints of an effective small group based on the literature review. See Appendix C for sermon based small group format. In addition, I served as the facilitator of the sermon based small group, which was strategic in modeling the critical dynamics of the sessions. A meeting location was selected that participants would be comfortable attending. The room was arranged in a circular fashion to promote unity, eye contact, premium visibility and most importantly, a warm, pleasant, and hospitable climate. The process was full engaged and the importance of meditating upon the sermon and other scriptures, building melodic and magnetic connections, and what it means to mature as a disciple were vital to changing the church's culture and climate and a sense of loss and alienation. As the data suggests, my role fulfilled one of the project's objective to educate and model to the focus group sermon-based small groups.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the focus group sessions, the participants expressed excitement and interest in continuing in a small group and a commitment to more consistent study of the sermon and scriptures. It was also suggested that the groups would have a profound impact on people in the church getting to know one another as they had experienced during these four weeks. With that in mind, it will be recommended that incorporating sermon based small groups as its process for developing sermon based disciples. The focus group began as simply a requirement for the Doctor of Ministry Project; however, it turned out to be just what The Fountain of New Life Church needed to begin rebuilding, healing, and growing.”

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS, SUMARY, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter restates the research project, describes the process, and summarizes the field experience and my reflections. It also addresses my concluding thoughts and lessons learned as well as recommendations for further study.

Summary Field Experience

In October 2009, I was chosen to serve as the assistant pastor of The Fountain of Pembroke Pines, Florida. My arrival at this ministry context was during the height of the economic crises in the United States with South Florida being one of the hardest hit areas as it pertained to foreclosures and unemployment. These crises hit many of the homes and families in this ministry context, which directly impacted its revenues. This financial decline led the ministry to revisit its budget for any cost reduction initiatives. After weighing several options, The Fountain of Pembroke Pines decided to merger with Miami's New Life International Church to form The Fountain of New Life Church in December 2010.

Though this merger relieved financial tensions that both churches were facing, it came with major strife, ridicule, and a minor exodus of servants. The merger was a spiritual blended family, which meant that it came with a series of challenges. The Fountain of Pembroke Pines proper was a church that viewed the church as an Outlier church. They viewed ministry from a social setting perspective in which they came to

fellowship and be served. The ministry setting appealed more to the intellect than the inspiration of the gospel. The servants were prideful in their earthly accomplishments and operated as a gated community African American church. On the other hand, Miami's New Life International Church proper was a church that focused more on loving all and serving the community regardless of status. It was a prototypical urban church with a high number of single parent families, low-income workers, and senior saints raising their grandchildren.

This non-polar merger of churches generated a colossal void for both ministries, theologically, spiritually, historically, and in some aspects, apologetically causing decreased stewardship and attendance, low morale, and apathetic attitudes and behaviors toward the progression of the ministry. It became clear that many people in the congregation were hurt, grieving, felt a sense of loss, alienation, and simply did not know the spiritual identity of the church. A pedagogical tool to address discipleship was not only necessary, but also vital in order for the church to progress and do kingdom building. The expectation was that this model would impact alienation and the church would grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation.

The best way to engage the congregation and obtain honest feedback was to assemble a focus group that was a true reflection of the church merger as well as new disciples who united with the church after the merger. It was determined that the best method was a phenomenological study using a qualitative research design. This qualitative design was determined to be the most effective means “for exploring and

understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.”¹

The goal was to engage a focus group to obtain transparent and honest feedback as it pertained to their feelings of the church’s spiritual identity, culture, and their relationship barometer within the congregation. Moreover, a desire to see if there was action assignments that could be explored and engaged to alleviate the alienation, redefine spiritual identity and create a new culture while building accountable relationships.

The focus group was engaged in four sermon based small group sessions as a component of the research design. The focus group sessions were a time of sharing, modeling, and gathering information as it pertain to the following objectives of the project.

- A. To educate and model to the focus group sermon-based small groups.
- B. To provide a system of accountability and fellowship.
- C. Give the participants of the focus group a forum, which will allow them to openly express what they experienced, as well as how they were affected.
- D. Give the participants of the focus group a platform to engage the sermon in more depth and ask questions of clarity.

The objectives of the focus group were tested twice via comparative methods using pre and post-surveys; once, prior to the sermon based small group session and again, at the completion of them. Quantitative tools were utilized for data analysis through Survey Monkey. In addition to the pre and post survey, journal reflections were collected from participants throughout the four-week small group sessions on how the sessions impacted them in their faith formation. Also, a random sampling of the focus group was selected to participate in an in-depth interview.

¹Ibid.

Reflections

This project has provided an enhanced appreciation of how sermon based small groups addresses discipleship in a ministry context in which people are hurting, grieving, feeling a sense of loss, alienation, and simply did not know the spiritual identity of the church. Prior to this project, an awareness of grief, void, disappointment, and loss existed regarding the church merger. Surprisingly however, the depth and myriad of feelings in which the parishioners felt was not discovered. The sermon based small group provided a safe, comfortable environment for the participants to express their feelings while being supported in their faith formation. In fact, several participants stressed the importance of having support and accountability to keep them focused on the meditative and maturational aspect of spiritual growth and development. Perhaps more than anything, this project educated me on how one's emotional dispositional can impact and in some cases impede one's discipleship.

Moreover, pre and post survey questions five and six indicated that the four sermon bases small group sessions had a positive impact in changing the culture of alienation and a sense of loss of family to a culture of accountability and fellowship. The researcher described the closeness of the group as magnetic. The focus group was designed to implore key elements of accountability and fellowship. It was discovered that one of the significant characteristics of this magnetism was its heterogeneity. The focus group had diversity in age, gender, personality types, spiritual maturity as well as participants from both congregations prior to the merger. The diversity of the group created the connection for organic relationships and a deeper appreciation for diversity. The heterogeneity created a sense of freshness and stimulated conversation and allowed

people to express feelings and thoughts that perhaps would not have occurred in a homogeneous group. The positive experience of the group led several participants to describe the magnetism as a sense of family, which was the opposite of the culture prior to the group. Based on these results, sermon based small groups would be valuable to other churches where a culture of alienation and lack of accountability and supportive relationships exist.

The data suggests that the facilitator was effective in modeling and educating to the focus these critical components of the sermon based small group. The participants were taught individually and collectively the expectations and dynamics of the sermon based small group through the small group covenant located in Appendix D. The small group covenant was essential in the process and served as a guide for making sermon base disciples. The project revealed that the facilitator modeling and adhering to the tenets of the small group covenant played a significant role in its impact on the group. The facilitator prayed, displayed transparency and vulnerability, submitted to weekly accountability partners, initiated making social connections, and most importantly came prepared with homework completed and questions to engage the group microscopically as it pertained to the sermon. These dynamics appeared to create an environment and culture in which others felt more comfortable to fully engage the process. Many participants wrote about the facilitator's role and impact in their journal reflections. Others shared their assessment in the in-depth interviews as well as during the focus group sessions. The facilitator's commitment to spiritual disciplines carried over into the participant's incorporation of spiritual disciplines in their faith formation.

The culture and climate throughout these sessions were advantageous in a number of ways. First, it allowed the members of the group to openly share their grief, pain and disappointments alienation, sense of loss of family and spiritual identity. Secondly, the researcher's eyes were opened to what really took place prior to his arrival. The latter was thanks to members disclosing more in these four sessions than they previously shared the entire time he had been at the church. Thirdly, it allowed me to minister to the group and guide them through their pain in a constructive and Christ-like way. By the end of these sessions, the majority of members expressed melodic feelings of social and spiritual connections.

The researcher derived that a supportive and suspension of judgment environment was more conducive for the participants to build authentic, accountable relationships and fully express themselves. There were moments in the focus group in which a small fragment of the participants attempted to nullify other participant's expressions and feelings. This small fragment of participants was those who could be consider more fundamental or conservative in their theology. However, the facilitator expediently redirected their responses and reminded them of the group covenant. The firm yet loving correction further supported this culture and climate of magnetic and melodic relationship in which the researcher learned was crucial for all the participants completing the four-week focus group.

Another exciting aspect of the four-week sermon based small group sessions was that it appeared to foster an environment and culture that can be described as meditative and maturational. A section was crafted in the homework entitled the microscope. This section provided an introductory usage of exegesis such as history of text, setting,

characters, and literary criticism to name a few. The questions were designed to catalyze a meditative desire to study the sermon and other related passages microscopically. As a result, members of the group were inspired to take personal accountability and investment of time in their spiritual growth and development through a microscopic examination of the sermon and other related passages. Intentional references were made to the sermon throughout the facilitation of the sermon groups, which helped to crystallize the importance of the sermon in their faith formation. Also, in the beginning of each session, the participants were asked to hold up their completed homework. This continuous intervention in the words of several participants cultivated a climate that stressed the importance of studying and being held accountable.

Another imprint of the sermon based small groups that participants expressed had a significant impact on their spiritual growth and development was the makeover questions. These life application questions were aimed at extrapolating the meditative moments into a maturational lifestyle. The participants were confronted with both living with the text through meditation and living out the text in spiritual and faith formation. The data suggests that as the participants meditated on the sermon and scripture microscopically and began to live out their faith it had a positive impact on their spiritual identity.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the course of this project, there were many lessons learned. Perhaps the lesson, which stood out the most was the impact that emotional and social connections has on discipleship. The value of a having a structured yet spiritual platform for parishioners to vocalize their vulnerabilities and ask clarifying questions about the

sermon, scriptures, or spiritual formation in general was important. Without the dialogue and didactic teaching which took place in the focus group sessions, the healing and rebuilding process would have been further delayed. Put more simply, the alienation and a sense of loss of culture and family would continue to be covered up while permeating the pews, making it even more challenging for a discipleship process.

Yet another lesson learned, is contrary to popular opinion, time does not heal all wounds or pain. Neither does just preaching a sermon or proceeding with church as usual negate what took place. Healing does not come until the issues are properly dealt with. This project demonstrated that some members would require more time than others to heal from voids, hurts, and displacements especially when a negative culture exists in the church. It also supported the viewpoint that some people will lose connection and feel a sense of loss and alienation due to ministry transitions.

Moreover, accountability and fellowship in the local church is critical for some disciples to feel connected and become fully engaged in ministry. The meet and greet component of the sermon based small group sessions proved to be significant in people making social and spiritual connections. These connections, in some cases, were more important than the homework questions. This project demonstrated that some members needed to feel the love, care, and support from their church in order to fully engage the spiritual disciplines of the church.

It is important to have a larger number of participants in a small group, preferably fifteen to twenty, so it does not affect the relational and social dynamics of the group. The probability of every participant attending each week is not very likely which was the case during this project. Therefore, a group with a small number of participants will reveal the

deficiencies of the group and change the thermostat of the group. The smaller the group, the more pressure is placed on the role of the facilitator to maintain the group.

Sermon based small groups placed more emphasis on the role of the sermon in the life of the church. Nearly 100% of the participants shared a high assessment and priority they placed on the sermon as it became the driving force of their faith formation. Participants disclosed that they were more attentive during the sermon proclamation. Also, they shared that they listened to the sermon more than once as a result of the focus group. In addition, facilitating the group and crafting good homework questions were more essential than a sermon type. A particular sermon type was not critical to leading effective sermon based small groups. Sermon based small groups can incorporate any typology of sermon into the pedagogical aspect of the spiritual growth and development.

Conclusions

This research project prompted a change in culture and climate within the group. This theory was clearly illustrated via the results of the post surveys, journal reflections, and in-depth interviews. Prior to the focus group, parishioners describe the culture and climate as one with a sense of loss of spiritual identity. Pre survey question eight revealed a fair percentage of the group did not view the sermon as playing a major role in their faith formation. In addition, pre survey question one revealed that some participants did not consider it important to study the sermon more in depth after hearing it.

The post surveys to these aforementioned questions highlighted a change in culture and climate as it pertained to the sermon. The post surveys revealed 90 percent of the group either agreed or strongly agreed that the sermon was important to one's faith formation and thus it was important to study it in depth after hearing it. As participants

studied the sermon microscopically, the data suggests that the sermon took a more critical role in their faith formation. The data from the journal reflections and in-depth interviews revealed that the participants described the meditative process of studying the sermon and other scriptures microscopically had significant impact in promoting a culture and climate of spiritual growth and development.

Moreover, this project corroborates the belief that a culture and climate of alienation and a sense of loss can change when people are provided with a system of accountability and fellowship coupled with a platform that permits them to openly express what they experienced, as well as how they were affected. In addition, when members make spiritual, emotional, and social connections and feel that their church is supporting them, the culture and climate of alienation and sense of loss can change.

Although it was difficult to fully gauge whether or not if total healing and restoration had taken place, the project did reveal that the sermon based small groups provided a change in the culture and climate of the church. Prior to the research project, the members of The Fountain of New Life expressed feelings of alienation and a sense of loss of culture, family, and spiritual identity. However, throughout the course of the focus group, members expressed they felt a sense of family, a renewed love for the church, an appreciation for the support they received and the relationships that were established, as well as their maturation as disciples through study the sermon microscopically, asking questions of clarity, and receiving didactic teaching. This was a significant step in the discipleship process to address this culture and climate.

Therefore, the hypothesis of this research project has been proven. The non-directional hypothesis is that if sermon based small groups is the pedagogical tool to

address discipleship, then it will impact alienation and the church will grow closer through in-depth sermon study and supporting each other in faith formation.

Recommendations for Further Study

The focus group has proven to be an effective tool to engage the congregation and obtain transparent and honest feedback as it pertained to their feelings of the church's spiritual identity, culture, and their relationship barometer within the congregation. Yet in still, an aspect that would have made this project even more effective would have been an inclusion of youth participants. The focus group consisted of adults only and thus was devoid of the impact the merger had on the youth. With that in mind, feedback from the youth would have enhanced the data, as it would have disclosed how the youth felt and think. Therefore, for further study the inclusion of youth in the focus group or a separate focus group of youth only is recommended.

Another recommendation, which would enhance this project, is to extend the focus group session to at least eight weeks to build authentic, magnetic relationships. Some people were more reserved and did not warm up until week three. Thus, an eight-week session would allow more time for participants to connect and support each other in faith formation.

Another recommendation which would strengthen this project would be to construct some questions on the pre and post survey that spoke explicitly to the culture and climate of the congregation. The questions that were used gathered some implicit data about the importance of fellowship, accountability, and studying with others. However, there were not any questions that explicitly asked about participants feeling about their church.

The final recommendation, which would strengthen this project, is to hold an educational session on sermon based small groups. More information on the dynamics and purpose of sermon based small groups as well as further explain the small group covenant in detail would make the project that much more beneficial. Though not having this session did not prohibit its impact, this session perhaps could have catalyzed the melodic connections and magnetic bonds as well as establish the tenor and tone of how to fully engage the platform.

APPENDIX A
PRE AND POST SURVEY QUESTIONS

APPENDIX A

PRE AND POST SURVEY QUESTIONS

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your participation is anonymous. PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ANYTHING ON THE SURVEY WHICH MAY BE USED TO IDENTIFY YOU. The survey has two sections. The first section asks you questions about your faith formation. The second section asks for demographic information. Again, thank you for participating in this survey.

SECTION I:

For each item below, **circle the number/statement** that best represents your viewpoint or knowledge. 1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

1. It is important to study the sermon more in depth after hearing it.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

2. I feel I am held accountable for my spiritual growth and development.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

3. It is important to be challenged weekly to stay focused on Jesus.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

4. It is important to read and apply scripture beyond weekly services.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

5. It is imperative for my spiritual development to have support from my church family when dealing with life's challenges.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

6. Fellowship amongst believers is important for spiritual growth and discipleship.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

7. Studying the Scriptures with others is important to me.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

8. The sermon has a major role in my faith formation.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

9. Serving others is important to my spiritual growth.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

10. I am very knowledgeable about sermon-based small groups.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

11. It is important to have an accountability partner at your local church.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

12. It is important to build relationships within my church family.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

SECTION II:

Directions: At "A." below, check whether you are male or female.

At "B." below, MAKE ONE CHECK at the age group in which you belong.

At "C." below, WRITE the number of years of your membership in this church.

A. ☐ Male ☐ Female

B. ☐ 20 – 29; ☐ 30 – 39; ☐ 40 – 49; ☐ 50 – 59; ☐ 60 – 69; ☐ 70 and above

C. _____ years of membership in this church

APPENDIX B
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX B
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your 4-week focus group.
2. Tell me about how you interact with the sermon now.
3. Did you grow in any ways through this experience? How?
4. Did this experience have an effect on our church (in your eyes)? How?
5. Each session included application questions, tell me about their impact if any on your spiritual growth and formation.

APPENDIX C
SMALL GROUP FORMAT

APPENDIX C
SMALL GROUP FORMAT

Snacks and Fellowships (15 minutes prior)

Sharing (15 minutes)

☐Prayer and Praise Reports

Study and Discussions (45 minutes)

☐Read and reflect over homework assignments

☐Reflections

Supplication through Prayer (15 minutes)

Small Group Homework Session #1

Sound the Alarm: Predator

1 Peter 5:8-11

Meet and Greet

1. In what month were you born? What character traits are accurate according to your horoscope?
2. What has been your experience and exposure with spiritual warfare?

The Microscope

1. 1 Peter 5:8 refers to the Devil as the Christian's enemy. List five other names for the Devil and provide scriptural references.
2. The apostle Peter states that Devil is like a roaring lion.
 - a. What animal does the Bible uses to refer to Christians? Provide biblical references?
 - b. What defensive mechanism does this animal have against a roaring lion?
3. Who was Peter's audience? Why did Peter need to address this issue of spiritual warfare? How is spiritual warfare defined in 1 Peter 5:8?

The Makeover

1. How will you live differently knowing that you are a target for the enemy?
2. What areas of your life do you feel need reinforcement against spiritual attack? What is your plan for securing these vulnerabilities?

Small Group Homework-Session #2

“Sound the Alarm: Terminator”

1 Samuel 17:40-50

Meet and Greet

1. What is your favorite summer vacation destination? Describe what you like the most about it.
2. What are the generational giants (curses) in your family?

The Microscope

1. Who is the author of 1 Samuel? What is the author’s intent for writing this book?
2. Why did Goliath intimidate the people? Why didn’t Goliath intimidate David?
3. What was the termination point for David?
4. What was David’s strategy for spiritual warfare?

The Makeover

1. What resonated with you the most about David’s dealing with Goliath and how will you apply it to the giants in your life?

Small Group Homework-Session #3
“Sound the Alarm: Lethal Weapon”

Ephesians 6:10-17

Meet and Greet

1. Which Lethal Weapon (I, II, III, IV) movie was your favorite? Who was your favorite character? (Danny Glover, Mel Gibson, Danny DeVito, or Chris Rock)
2. Do you prefer to exercise and eat what you like or eat healthy and not exercise?

The Microscope

1. What does Paul mean by the term “heavenly places?”
2. Compare 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and Ephesians 6:10-17. What are offensive weapons Paul list in these passages? What are the defensive weapons Paul list in these passages.
3. How are we to use our weapons in spiritual warfare according to passages above?

The Makeover

1. Which component of the armor of God is the most difficult for you to put on daily? Why?
2. Who holds you accountable for getting spiritually dressed daily? How does (would, if no accountability partner) an accountability partner make a difference with you being ready for battle?

Small Group Homework-Session #4

“Sound the Alarm: Die Hard”

2 Timothy 4:6-11

Meet and Greet

1. Are you better at starting, finishing, or procrastinating?
2. How would you like to be remembered?

The Microscope

1. Why was Paul so confident though he was facing imminent death?”
2. Compare Matthew 25:31 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8. What do the authors mean by “Well done thou good and faithful servant” and “I fought a good fight”?
3. What was the source of Paul’s warfare? (See Eph. 6:12). How did he combat the warfare according to 2 Tim. 4:6-8?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 9:25 and 2 Timothy 4:8. Is Paul speaking of the same crown? What is the criterion for receiving the crown(s)?

The Makeover

1. What admiral traits did you see in Paul that you think you could benefit from? Will you implement them in your fight? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D
SMALL GROUP COVENANT

APPENDIX D**SMALL GROUP COVENANT**

Welcome to Small Groups at The Fountain of New Life Church. Congratulations on your desire to grow deeper in your relationship with God through this weekly study and the relationships that will begin in this Small Group.

As a participant of this group, you will be asked to enter into a covenant with the other participants to make this Small Group a priority. To be a part of the group, you are asked to make the following commitments:

- 1) I will make this group a priority by attending each week, keeping up with my assignments and participating in group discussion.
- 2) I will regularly attend The Fountain services and carefully engage the sermon.
- 3) I will strive to build authentic relationships with those in this group by showing care, providing encouragement and praying for their needs.
- 4) I will respect others at all times and keep what is shared in group confidential.
- 5) I will explore honestly my next steps for spiritual growth.

Name

Date

FIVE MARKS OF A HEALTHY GROUP

For our group to be healthy, we need to

1. Make spiritual growth our number one priority (Rom 8:29).
2. Accept one another in love just as Christ has accepted us (Rom 15:7).
3. Take care of one another in love without crossing over the line into parenting or taking inappropriate responsibility for solving the problems of others (Jn 13:34).
4. Treat each other with respect in both speech and action (Eph 4:25-5:2).
5. Keep our commitments to the group—including attending regularly, doing the homework, and keeping confidences whenever requested (Ps 15:1-2, 4b).

APPENDIX E
DEMOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Based on the pre-survey demographical section, these are the demographics of the focus group. Of the nineteen participants:

(Gender) Male – 31.6% Female – 68.4%

(Age) Between the age 20 - 29 = 10.5%

Between the age 30 - 39 = 26.3%

Between the age 40 - 49 = 31.6%

Between the age 50- 59 = 21.1%

Between the age 60 - 69 = 10.5%

Between the age 70 and above = 0%

(Years of Church Membership)

0 – 2 years = 27.8% 3 – 5 years = 38.8% 6 – 8 years = 16.7% 9 – 11 years = 0%

12 years and above = 16.7%

APPENDIX F
PRE AND POST SURVEY RESULTS

APPENDIX F

PRE AND POST SURVEY RESULTS

Members of the focus group were asked to circle the number/statement, which best represents their viewpoint or knowledge.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree

Statement 1 - It is important to study the sermon more in depth after hearing it.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	5.3%	0%
3 Agree	42.1%	36.8%
4 Strongly Agree	47.4%	57.9%
Rating Average	3.32	3.47

Statement 2 - I feel I am held accountable for my spiritual growth and development.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
3 Agree	26.3%	21.1%
4 Strongly Agree	63.2%	68.4%
Rating Average	3.47	3.53

Statement 3 - It is important to be challenged weekly by the sermon to stay focused on Jesus.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	31.6%	36.8%
4 Strongly Agree	63.2%	57.9%
Rating Average	3.53	3.47

Statement 4 - It is important to read and apply scripture beyond weekly services.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	21.1%	26.3%
4 Strongly Agree	73.7%	68.4%
Rating Average	3.63	3.58

Statement 5 – It is imperative for my spiritual development to have support from my church family when dealing with life’s challenges.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	47.4%	42.1%
4 Strongly Agree	47.4%	52.6%
Rating Average	3.37	3.42

Statement 6 - Fellowship amongst believers is important for spiritual growth and discipleship.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	31.6%	26.3%
4 Strongly Agree	63.2%	68.4%
Rating Average	3.53	3.58

Statement 7- Studying the Scriptures with others is important to me.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	47.4%	42.1%
4 Strongly Agree	47.4%	52.6%
Rating Average	3.37	3.42

Statement 8 - The sermon has a major role in my faith formation.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	10.5%	5.3%
3 Agree	42.1%	31.5%
4 Strongly Agree	42.1%	57.9%
Rating Average	3.21	3.42

Statement 9 - Serving with others is important to my spiritual growth.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	21.1%	26.3%
4 Strongly Agree	73.7%	68.4%
Rating Average	3.63	3.58

Statement 10 – I am very knowledgeable about sermon-based discipleship.

	Pre-Survey	Post Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	31.6%	21.1%
3 Agree	47.4%	47.4%
4 Strongly Agree	15.8%	26.3%
Rating Average	2.74	2.95

Statement 11 – It is important to have an accountability partner at your local church.

	Pre-Survey	Post Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	5.3%	10.5%
3 Agree	31.6%	36.8%
4 Strongly Agree	57.9%	47.4%
Rating Average	3.42	3.26

Statement 12 – It is important to build relationships within my church family.

	Pre-Survey	Post Survey
1 Strongly Disagree	5.3%	5.3%
2 Disagree	0%	0%
3 Agree	31.6%	26.3%
4 Strongly Agree	63.2%	68.4%
Rating Average	3.53	3.58

APPENDIX G
JOURNAL REFLECTION CODING TABLE

APPENDIX G

JOURNAL REFLECTION CODING TABLE

<i>Journal Reflection</i>	<i>Preliminary Codes</i>	<i>Final Code</i>
I too enjoyed learning something new... We all may be in a different walk of life, but it's good to have time to reflect, share, and be reminded we are more alike than we admit to. Through our sharing it was loud and clear that we need a circle of like-minded people to keep us grounded.... Until next week may God Bless!!!!	ENJOYMENT³	¹ MAGNETIC
I am glad I attended. It was great hearing from everyone and personally feeling connected. Meeting another Cancer was nice as well. If everyone had a chance, read Today's word; working in the kingdom (2). A lot of us last night touched on how our careers influence our mind and mood... Look forward to connecting more...	LEARNING²	
The way the small group impacted me was I pray more than I ever have before and give it all to GOD to fight for me. Well I was given a spiritual eye opener to what the meaning of spiritual warfare means after asking questions and going deeper into the sermon. I am now able to walk my walk with a different path and see obstacles with the mindset to deal with things a little differently. I know I will be in a storm, or coming out of a storm, or heading into a storm. I just won't know when any will actually take place. I'll be better alert to handle things. Thank you again Pastor Taylor for your sessions, and just the invitation to be apart of this process. May showers of blessings pour down on you! I hope to still be able to learn	SHARING¹	² MEDITATIVE
	ACCOUNTABILITY¹	
	REFLECTION¹	³ MELODIC
	GLAD¹	¹ MELODIC
	SHARING²	
	CONNECTION²	² MAGNETIC
	RELATIONSHIPS²	
	PRAYER	MATURATIONAL
	SURRENDER	
	SPIRITUAL – AWARENESS	MATURATIONAL
	LEARNING	
	STUDYING	
	WALK DIFFERENTLY	

from your sermons in the near future.

Journal Reflection

The Sound the Alarm focus small group afforded me the opportunity to take my understanding of spiritual warfare to another level. The teaching, digging into God's word, sharing in group and life application catapulted my knowledge base and my awareness of spiritual warfare. I now know that I must be on the offence as attacks are inevitable. Thank you, Pastor Taylor for the opportunity to learn and grow. This was a tremendous life altering opportunity.

Your session gave me a chance to get more study and word in me. I heard from other believers and hopefully helped them with my insight and made me want to sharpen my skills. The fellowship was great as well and to support you and others meant a lot to me.

My experience was indeed a positive one. The sessions provided clarity and enhanced my understanding of the bible. Although there were varying views it solidified my beliefs and my desire to learn more.

As a new member to the church and community, this small group allowed me to connect with others and provided a sense of family. It was great having people to ask how you are doing and to pray for you. I learned so much about spiritual warfare and really made me pay closer attention to the sermon.

Preliminary Codes

¹UNDERSTANDING

¹TEACHING/LEARNING

¹STUDYING

²SHARING

¹LIFE APPLICATION

¹AWARENESS

¹GROWTH

¹STUDYING

²SHARING

³INSPIRATION

²FELLOWSHIP

²SUPPORT

EXPERIENCE

UNDERSTANDING

LEARNING

¹CONNECTION

¹SENSE OF FAMILY

¹CARE/CONCERN

Final Code

¹MATURATIONAL

²MAGNETIC

¹MEDITATIVE

²MAGNETIC

MATURATIONAL

¹MAGNETIC

²MATURATIONAL

²PRAYER**²LEARNING****²ATTENTIVENESS TO
SERMON*****Journal Reflection***

The time of fellowship before and after group was refreshing. It reminded me of the way our church used to be. I laughed, talked, and shared and many nights we closed the church while talking in the parking lot. It was great to meet and share with people who were going through similar situations. I never knew that studying the Bible could be so much fun.

I loved studying the Bible with others and hearing their thoughts. It was great to put names with some faces that I had seen for years. I love my church even more now.

I feel like I have grown a lot in this short period of time. In all of my church experiences, I never felt like whether I studied the bible mattered. I knew that if I didn't study the bible and do my homework that I would let my

Preliminary Codes**¹FELLOWSHIP****¹HIGH EMOTIONS****¹SHARING/CONNECTING****²STUDYING****¹LOVE****²STUDYING****¹SHARING****¹FELLOWSHIP****¹HIGH REGARD
FEELINGS****GROWTH****STUDY*****Final Code*****¹MAGNETIC****² MEDITATIVE****¹MAGNETIC****² MEDITATIVE****MATURATIONAL**

group down and not have something to contribute. The most amazing part was the weekly application challenge in how to apply the sermon to my life.

ACCOUNTABILITY

SHARING

LIFE APPLICATION

APPENDIX H

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS IN-DEPTH OVERVIEW

APPENDIX H

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS IN-DEPTH OVERVIEW

Small Group Session One: Sound the Alarm: Predator

The session opened with prayer and blessing of the food. The researcher then thanked everyone for his or her participation. A brief synopsis of the project was provided, at which point, the researcher presented the participants with a small group covenant agreement to guide their four-week session. Copies of small group covenant can be found in Appendix D. Once all the preliminaries were established, the researcher began to facilitate the session using the sermon homework guide. It also allowed participants to share their struggles and battles with spiritual warfare and pray for one another.

The opening questions were aimed to stimulate conversation and the process for building relationships within the group. The getting to know you questions lasted for almost 45 minutes as people were elated to share, talk, laugh, and express themselves transparently with other brothers and sisters from their church. One of the participants of the group stated, “It is refreshing to hear that I am normal and go through the same things as others.” The high energy and connection with others created a natural flow for the researcher to transition into studying the sermon in more depth.

Each participant was asked to share his or her answers to the digging deeper section of the homework. Seemingly participants were ecstatic to share their responses and learn from each other. The participants were well prepared for the discussions and

took pride in their study. After discussing the historical and biblical implications of spiritual warfare, the researcher asked the participants of the focus group how they would use this information to live differently. These are a few of the comments, which were expressed:

1. I will pray more consistently.
2. I will read and study my bible more so I can become stronger in my faith.
3. I am not going to make myself an easy target for the Devil.
4. I will seek out people to hold me accountable. I really try to be strong sometimes but it becomes hard trying to do it by yourself.

After participants expressed their vulnerabilities, the researcher thanked all for sharing their pain and being transparent, opted to end the small group session by having participants pair with other participants and pray for one another. The focus group prayed for roughly five minutes, and afterwards, they embraced and encouraged each other. The researcher encouraged participants to journal about their focus group experience. Several group participants told the researcher how grateful and impactful the session was and viewing this as something the church could richly benefit from as a whole. They further shared how much fun they had while studying together. After the session was over, the researcher and several participants talked and shared over snacks for about 10-15 minutes.

Small Group Session Two: Sound the Alarm: Terminator

This session revealed that there are giants in our lives that have reached their extinction date and need to be terminated before they caused further damage and destruction in our families, our faith, and our futures. Practical principles were shared on how to become the Terminator to the giants in our lives. Participants were allowed to

encourage and pray for each other to face their giants. The workshop opened with prayer. The researcher opened with a time of reflection from last week's session and asked for an update on their application implementation from this previous week. This time of reflection and accountability turned into a lengthy yet powerful discussion about how their lives were interacting with our sermon study. Some shared how they failed while others had success. The group was very supportive of one another.

After this lengthy discussion, the researcher asked the participants to turn their attention to the sermon homework guide. The researcher provided a quick overview of the sermon and asked if anyone had any questions pertaining to it that might not be addressed via the homework. The focus group quickly delved into the getting to know you section. Participants shared about their favorite vacation spots as well as the generational giants in their families. The sharing of the generational giants allowed the researcher to transition into the biblical story at hand 1 Samuel 17. This family story about David and Goliath created organic excitement and communication within the focus group.

Participants were engaged with the metaphorical usage of Goliath as giants in our lives. From there, a lengthy discussion took place about the giants that had been terrorizing participant's families for decades. Participants began to cry as they shared the historical pain that is currently plaguing their present contexts. The researcher sensed that many participants were desirous of experiencing a breakthrough or breaking the cycle so he moved into the application section of the homework.

By the end of the session, it was obvious the participants of the focus group were experiencing liberation after examining how David dealt with the giant in his life. The

comment, which shocked the researcher the most was when one participant declared, “I didn’t know that I had the spiritual power to deal with my giants. I never looked at this story this way. I am ready to take authority over my demons.” Many other participants echoed the same sentiments about feeling empowered to deal with their giants.

The researcher asked participants who were facing the similar giants in their lives to pray for one another and to hold each other accountable during the week. After about five minutes of intercessory prayer, the researcher encouraged the participants to journal about their focus group experience and to enjoy the food and fellowship with one another prior to leaving.

Small Group Session Three: Sound the Alarm: Lethal Weapon

This session provided biblical explanation our spiritual weapons and how we are to use them in warfare. It also challenged the participants not to fight each other but exposed the structure of our spiritual enemy. In addition, the participants were challenged to have accountability partners in their faith formation. The workshop opened with prayer. The researcher opened with a time of reflection from last week’s session and asked for an update on their application implementation from this previous week. Out of all four small group sessions, this session was the longest in time and transparency. The group began to share how it seemed that it was one of the toughest weeks in a long time. Moreover, they attributed it to them making a decision to deal with their demons and take authority of their giants. Several of the comments that stood out to the researcher were as follows:

1. Spiritual warfare is real.
2. It seems that every sense you have been preaching on spiritual warfare and we have been studying together, the war has intensified. It has been at my house, work, children, and even at church.
3. Having somebody to pray with you while you are going through has encouraged me to stay in the fight.

As predicted, this was a lengthy and intense discussion primarily because the members of the group began to re-live various painful moments in their lives. After this discussion, the researcher deviated from the format and went directly into the digging deeper section of the homework guide. The researcher and the group defined and discussed the offensive and defensive weapons of spiritual warfare. Scriptures and references to the sermon were also provided. The participants were highly engaged in the discussion as they express how they now felt prepared for spiritual warfare.

The workshop concluded with prayer, and the participants were encouraged to get dressed daily for spiritual warfare. The researcher reminded the participants to journal their experience. Participants and the researcher socialized over food for about 15 minutes.

Small Group Session Four: Sound the Alarm: Die Hard

This session focused on us living life to the fullest and giving it all that we have to offer. We examined the spiritual model Paul exemplified in 2 Timothy 4:6-11. This session challenged the participants to think about their future, legacy, and relationship with others. Similar to the others before it, the workshop opened with scripture and prayer. The group paused for a moment to reflect on everything that had taken place throughout the course of the last few weeks. This session was unique as it dealt with the

inevitable reality of death and legacy. Many of the participants were quiet uncomfortable in the beginning but as time elapsed they became more comfortable as we studied the mindset and actions of the apostle Paul. The researcher asked each participant how he or she would like to be remembered. This question stimulated great conversation and emotions for about ten minutes, as many of the participants had not given serious thought to the question prior to the homework. The next thirty minutes were spent on the digging deeper section of the homework. The participants were fully engaged in learning and sharing about fighting until the end to receive God's stamp of approval with the words "Well done thou good and faithful servant" and I fought a good fight. The group reached a consensus that the ultimate goal of spiritual warfare is physical death.

The researcher then presented to the group the following application question for discussion. "What admiral traits did you see in Paul that you think you could benefit from? The following are some of the comments from the question:

1. I like the fact that Paul was committed to the end. I tend to give up easily when things get hard. I would love to have that type of commitment.
2. Paul had a clear focus in a chaotic situation. My problem is that I don't stay focus on the right fight.
3. Paul was thoughtful of others even while he was going through. I am often self-centered and isolated when I am facing trials and problems. It takes a lot for a person to still take interest in the welfare of others while their situation is jacked up. Lord, help me become more like Paul.
4. I want to be hard like Paul. He was scared of dying. I am not soft but I am scared of dying.

The researcher thanked the participants for the participation in the four-week focus group. The workshop concluded with prayer, and the participants were encouraged to live with their legacy in mind. The researcher reminded the participants to journal their experience and to complete the post survey that would be emailed to them within twenty-

four hours. The researcher also had hard copies of the survey for those who preferred to complete it manually. Participants and the researcher socialized over food for about 15 minutes.

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